Sins of the Father

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Sins of the Father

by Lydia_Gastrell

Summary

After being arrested for crimes he didn't commit and grievously wounded, Dr. Frederick Chilton isn't quite the same. His career, his house, his expensive possessions; he no longer feels anything for them even as he furiously holds on to them out of habit or spite. He finally begins to feel like himself again when he steps away from the world of the psychotic and back into regular private practice with just one patient, someone he might actually be able to help for once.

But even with Hannibal's recent surrender and incarceration, there is no rest for the BAU or the city of Baltimore. Someone is targeting the blood relatives of past serial-killers and leaving them as horrific displays of righteous punishment. When the killer shows that even children are not out of bounds, Will Graham returns to hunt him down. In a cruel twist, he may have to seek help from the last person in the world who wants to see him, the man he betrayed and almost killed with a phone call.

Notes

1) This fic is going to be LONG. I'm not sure how many chapters yet, but be prepared for like 90K+.
2) The first two chapters act as prologues, written in a montage style of scenes covering a big stretch of time.
3) Chapter one is basically season 2 up to "Yakimono", told from Chilton's off-screen perspective.
4) The real plot and forward action will start in chapter 3, and follow a more regular progression of time.

Before

~BEFORE~

“I appreciate your willingness to take on another private patient, especially in your current condition. ”

Frederick gripped the silver head of his antique walking stick while managing to lean most of his weight against the back of a chair. Sweat drizzled down his back as dull pain throbbed from the healing slice down his torso. He gave a dismissive shrug, smiling.

He did not, in fact, have any other private patients. As director of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, he had more than enough on his plate dealing with the inmates. The most recent addition to the menagerie in particular, and the most likely reason he was now sitting across from the head of the psychology department at John Hopkins.

Will Graham, my golden ticket…

Dr. Morse, a wizened piece of academic old wood who had ignored Frederick for years, gave him an avuncular smile. “I trust this will not interfere with any of your ongoing research projects. I’m anxious to read your next paper.”

I bet you are. Frederick smiled again, basking in Morse's poorly concealed envy. Will Graham, the man who had been the subject of academic speculation and cocktail party gossip for years was now under his care, locked up in his hospital, and Frederick had every intention of keeping his session notes under lock and key.

Of course, if his colleagues wanted to issue invitations and open doors for him in the hopes of hearing a few juicy observations slip now and then, who was he to object? It was about time his colleagues realized that he was more than a hospital administrator, signing requisition forms and approving payrolls.

“I’m sure it won’t be any trouble. An hour a week is hardly an imposition. I’m glad to do it.” Frederick added a weary sigh. Being asked to take on a patient—and one that sounded less than boring, quite frankly—might not sound like much of a boon, but people like Dr. Morse didn’t ask favors lightly. People begged *to do* favors for people like Carl Morse, not the other way around.

Frederick beamed.

Dr. Morse slid a brown folder from his desk and handed it to him. “The university is anxious to keep Miss Caven enrolled, as you can imagine. These overachieving students are just the sort of flashy PR that the president loves, and he’s worried MIT has been maneuvering to lure her away. But, what with her age and family situation, the legal office wants us to cover all bases.”

Which was code for cover their legal asses. College campuses were not kindergartens, and having minor age students presented unique legal concerns, even if they were high IQ wunderkinds. Frederick had done some research and written a few papers on pediatric psychology, but that had been years ago and early in his career before he had discovered the popular allure of *abnormal* psychology.

He flipped the folder open and scanned the personal details. Ellery Caven—rather old fashioned name—freshman enrolled in the school of sciences, projected chemistry major, graduated high school 2012—

Frederick looked up. "Overachiever, indeed. It says here she graduated high school at thirteen? She's fifteen now, why the delay in admittance?"

Dr. Morse raised his brow and nodded at the folder. Frederick read on.

Mother, Scythia Caven, died 2012 in a car accident. Father, unknown. Maternal relations unwilling to assume guardianship. Assigned as a ward of the state, 2012, currently residing—

Frederick sucked in a breath, causing his stitches to twinge. Was he reading this correctly? The child had relatives on her mother's side, but they were refusing guardianship? They had just tossed her away to the foster system? Even if the family was flat broke it made little sense. Relatives didn't have to adopt, they could serve as foster parents within the system and collect the same monthly assistance as anyone else in the program.

Frederick felt ill, and for the first time in weeks it had nothing to do with being sliced open. *This kid has been totally abandoned.*

And yet she had gained admittance to an Ivy League school before she was old enough to drive. Perhaps this favor wasn't going to be so boring after all.

***

Frederick arrived early, shuffling into the office Dr. Morse had set aside for the weekly sessions. It was a large room, all dark wood and green upholstery, reminding Frederick of a 19th century gentlemen's club, or a steakhouse that was trying too hard. Too many paintings hung on the walls and every horizontal surface was cluttered with some kind of trinket, functional or not. He hated clutter and dark. He had spent too many years living in tiny apartments, stuffed to the gills with junk his mother had collected because they were always too broke to risk throwing out something they might need.

He dropped his briefcase with a grunt and made to wipe his damp face with a handkerchief. Hiring a personal assistant, or at least a driver, would have been the smart move, but he couldn't stand the idea of someone watching him struggle—

"Hello."

“Argh!” Frederick spun around, dropping his cane and sending a sharp pain up his mid section. He stumbled and gripped the back of a nearby sofa.

A young woman appeared, coming around the tall wingback chair that had hidden her. She was average height, perhaps five and half feet, with dark blond hair pulled back and up in some sort of clip. She wore dark jeans and a blue cable-knit sweater, both a bit too large for her frame.

She picked up his cane, which had done a circular roll to the middle of the room. "Sorry about that." She handed it to him.

Frederick pressed his lips in annoyance. First impressions were key with patients, necessary to establishing the proper power dynamic. Though he doubted it would be much of an issue here. This patient was a fifteen year old kid; he could consider the power dynamic a foregone conclusion.

"I meant to scare you, but I didn't realize you were hurt." Her lips twitched up at the corners as she held unblinking eye contact. "Oops."

Maybe not so foregone.

"If you would have a seat, Miss Caven, we can get started." He took a leather folio from his briefcase and made his way to the pair of wingback chairs where she had been sitting, lowering himself into the one with the best angle to the door. He no longer felt comfortable without a clear view of a room's entrance.

Though his days in pediatric psychology were far behind him, the memories sat fresh and ready in his mind. He was prepared for sarcasm and false apathy, as well as the carefully measured hostility to authority that so many teenagers exhibited when faced with involuntary assessment. They were the usual cocktail of defense mechanisms when presented with an unknown object of authority.

What he was not prepared for, however, was a pair of untroubled maroon eyes watching him patiently. Miss Caven crossed her legs and laced her fingers together over one knee, a self-possessed pose that, for reasons he couldn't quite yet place, irritated the hell out of him.

"Why don't we start with introductions?" He flipped open his folio and clicked his pen to the ready. "I'm Dr. Chilton and the university has asked me to sit down with you once a week to make sure you're getting on well here."

"What's your first name?" Seeing Frederick's quick frown, she added, "Don't worry, I don't plan to use it. That would be rude."

Frederick's fingers itched with the desire to jot something down. He resisted. "Frederick."

She nodded, satisfied.

"And you?" He replied.

"You already know my name, and probably a lot more."

And she doesn't like that. Considering the details he had read in her file, he couldn't blame her. Time for an ice breaking maneuver.

"Yes, but I said my crusty old-fashioned name out loud, so now you have to do the same."

Her eyes widened. "Ellery isn't crusty and old-fashioned."

"Weeelll..." He waffled, making a face. "It isn't exactly common. It's not like a Jennifer or a Britney."

At the sound of the two most pop-culture names he could think of, she scrunched up her nose in distaste. The action had the instant effect of making her look her age, unlike her posture and manner of sitting.

Unlike holding easy eye contact with a stranger three times her age.

Ah-ha. Her file had contained a few notes from her professors, mostly laymen observations of her behavior. He had noticed a trend among them, complaints that she was passive-aggressive and mocking, but none had cited any real kind of behavior problem or specific instances. This, plus his own negative reaction to the way she was sitting, gave him a curious idea.

"There is some suggestion that old fashioned names can have the effect of causing children to mature early. The name creates a subtle cultural expectation of mature behavior."

Miss Caven raised her brow, both surprised and a bit suspicious. "If that's the case, you must have been balancing your checkbook when you were twelve, Frederick."

"According to your school records, you would have had no trouble doing that when you were ten."

"I tested out of algebra when I as nine."

"But I bet they didn't let you have a checking account."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Of course not."

"So by the time you graduated you would have easily been able to calculate the compound interest paid on a five year car loan with an APR of nine percent."

"That's basic math."

"But I bet they didn't let you get a driver's license."

Miss Caven drew a deep breath, her eyes once against narrowing at she examined him. Finally, she said, "No, they didn't."

"And you still can't drive or buy a car. There's a lot of things you can't do. A student at one of the most prestigious universities in the world and yet.." He made an open gesture. "...treated like a child."

She parted her lips in surprise, her dark eyes rounding but never leaving his.

Frederick had entered the room prepared to encounter a textbook case of abandonment issues and PTSD, perhaps mixed with a touch of narcissism owing to her academic achievements—and while he was sure those issues were there beneath her tranquil exterior, the more pressing issue was not how she viewed the world, but rather how that world was viewing her.

He flipped up the legal pad on his folio and removed her file, holding it up. "Some of your instructors included comments on your behavior in their semester evaluations." He hesitated, knowing this tactic would either work or fail miserably. "Several of them described you as passive aggressive and mocking."

At that, she leaned forward. "That's a bunch of crap."

"I suspected as much."

"What?"

"I *suspect* that their evaluations of your behavior are heavily biased due to your age." He tapped his pen a few times. "Adults have expectations about how children will interact with them, how children will behave. It's almost everything, from speech patterns to posture. There's a certain...dynamic that most of them will accept, and when a child doesn't behave according to that mold, adults will sometimes—"

"Get agitated when I don't defer to them? Tell me I'm being 'disrespectful' when I say or do something an adult just did without comment? Praise me for being so mature and ahead of my peers while at the same time wishing I would just play with my phone and speak in hashtags?"

Bullseye.

"I think you'll find that hypocrisy, unlike wisdom, actually does tend to increase with age. You graduated from high school five years early, Miss Caven. You must be familiar with envy and resentment."

"You think my professors resent me?"

"Well, I doubt any of them were getting straight As at John Hopkins before they could get a learner's permit."

"Point taken." She looked away from him for the first time since they sat down. A marked improvement, since he did suspect her penchant for unwavering eye contact was indeed a defense mechanism, at least partially. "If that's the case, shouldn't they be the ones in here? Talking about their mothers and 'self-esteem' issues and why they feel the need to compete with a freshman?"

He smiled inwardly, pleased to hear some of that sarcastic hostility he had initially expected. It was a good sign. "In a perfect world, yes, but here we are. The school wants you to be comfortable and well adjusted because they like the idea of including your name and age in

their promotional materials. *And* having a minor under sixteen on campus means they want to establish a long paper trail proving they took all responsible steps to see to your well being."

"You are...weirdly honest."

That sure as hell wasn't an accusation he heard often. Though any dishonesty he might engage in professionally was, mostly, necessary. He had no cause to lie here, nothing to gain and no colleagues to impress. His patients at the hospital were considered almost public property to the psychiatric community, with doctors from all over applying to interview them, which forced him to be cautious. He wanted to project the right image, after all, and it would hardly do for one of the inmates to start prattling off anecdotes about him that might create an image contrary to what he wanted.

If only he had cut off access to Abel Gideon when he had had the chance. If only he hadn't felt the need to make a name for himself with that lunatic—

Thoughts for another time.

The point was that no one was coming to dissect Miss Caven's mind for a scholarly paper, nor ask her questions about her primary psychiatrist. He could just...do his job.

For a brief moment, Frederick swore he felt a weight lifting from his chest. Between Abel Gideon and now Will Graham, his every waking moment was beginning to feel like a battle at the very edges of his ability.

"Honesty is going to be key in these sessions," He said, clearing his throat.

"In that case, I'm sorry about earlier."

He brushed a hand through the air. "You already apologized for startling me."

"No, I mean for using your first name. I did it thirty seconds after saying I wouldn't. That was rude."

He gave a deep nod, intentionally theatrical. "Apology accepted."

"What do you expect me to talk about when we're here?"

"Anything you want. I may steer the conversation to subjects I think are of particular importance or may be troubling you, but in the end it's whatever you feel the need to discuss."

She laced her fingers over her knee again, her eyes boring into his. "And you'll tell the dean what we talk about and that everything is fine with me? I don't have any money. I need to stay here and keep the scholarship they gave me."

Despite her focus and easy posture, he heard the waver in her voice. She was scared. Between no family and whatever foster home she was currently residing in, the university was her primary source of stability. Education represented her future and her escape. Just as it once had for him.

He closed his folio and leaned forward, ignoring the twinge from his scar. "This is not an evaluation to determine your suitability to be here. The school wants you here. And one thing I promise your age will not effect is doctor-patient confidentiality. Nothing you say in these sessions will go further than what I write on this pad, which no one else will read."

"Can I read it?"

"If you want to. Can you read shorthand?"

Her lips spread in a closed smile that struck Frederick as oddly familiar. "I'll learn."

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On the day of his third session with Miss Caven, Frederick arrived in a mixed mood. Will Graham was still refusing to speak to him, though he had had plenty to say to Alana Bloom. It was equal parts frustrating and unfair. Bloom provided a sympathetic ear to Graham's lies, going so far as too fall for his well performed antics under hypnosis. She was now convinced he had been in a dissociative stated when he committed his crimes, and was thus not responsible.

Nonsense.

But then, Frederick had just that morning received a handwritten invitation to dine at Hannibal Lecter's table, which had done much to raise his spirits. Hannibal's invitations were sought after, and after years of being ignored it felt good to have Hannibal pursuing his company for a change. It was Hannibal's thirst for any news on Will Graham that had prompted the invitation, but that hardly mattered. What mattered was getting invited.

As had occurred during their last two sessions, Frederick felt a sudden and welcome wave of relief when he stepped into the gaudy office and removed his suit jacket. His one private patient was making excellent progress, though progress implied there had been something wrong to begin with. He wasn't sure there was, but Miss Caven's demeanor had noticeably relaxed. She was still uncommonly self-possessed for someone so young, but he could see she had been amplifying those traits during their first session.

It was a difficult thing to admit, even if just to himself. He was the therapist, after all. He wasn't there to gain temporary escape from the rest of his life.

"I've been going over my course schedule for next semester, and I have to choose a few history classes to fill the requirement."

"Are you uninterested in history?" He felt he already knew the answer.

"I would major in history if they would let me." She reached into the plastic shopping bag on her lap and pulled out another handful of chocolate covered raisins. Frederick noticed the bag was from a dollar store nearby.

"And why wouldn't they allow it?"

"Because no one cares about the humanities and the prevailing wisdom is that overachieving kids are all little robots. It was math, science, or nothing. Chemistry is fine, though. I can make it work."

"Even if you can't major in history, you can still take many of the classes. What did you have in mind?"

She swallowed her mouthful of candy and gave him that mischievous closed smirk. "There's a class on the sexual revolution. I think that one would be fun to take."

Frederick let out an exaggerated groan. "For the sole purpose of making the instructor and the other students uncomfortable?"

"Can you think of a better reason?"

"*Don't* do that."

"Ugh, fine. You're no fun."

"So I'm told."

She held out the bag of candy. "Can you have chocolate yet?"

"There isn't much protein in chocolate, but I still should..." Frederick broke off, catching himself and the subject too late. Miss Caven pulled her hand back, watching him carefully as silent seconds passed.

"I still shouldn't," he said. "You are aware of what happened to me?"

"I didn't mean to pry. I searched your name only to find out your birthday."

Frederick gave her a confused look. "Why would you want to know my birthday?"

She shrugged, breaking eye contact in a rare display. "To send you a funny card. People should get something on their birthdays, even if it's just a card."

She continued to eat her candy, leaving Frederick to wonder how why she thought he wouldn't otherwise get something on his birthday.

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Five weeks after their first session and he had finally managed to get her to say something about her parents. Or rather, parent, singular.

"I don't want to be adopted. I don't need a replacement for my mom."

"You have been in foster care for almost two years now, and are looking at another three before you age out. Do you wish you had been adopted earlier? Do you feel this way because you think it's too late?"

"I feel this way because I don't need it. I could take care of myself right now, but the court won't let me." She pulled her loose hair back, securing it with an elastic tie. "People adopt because they want children. I'm not going to be another person's child."

Frederick nodded, making a note. There was a strain in her voice, something new. She didn't like this subject, but he could sense the depths there, things that weighed on her. For the first time in a long time, he felt determined to lift that weight from a patient. "You don't believe the Morgans see you are one of their children?"

"The Morgans are not my parents, they're my landlords." Her voice turned distant, monotone. "They are housing me, with government pay, not raising me. My mom already did that."

He was surprised when she reached down the collar of her sweater and pulled a silver locket free. It was rectangular in shape, heavily etched in worn down filigree. It looked antique and expensive.

"Here she is." She crossed the carpeted distance, holding the open locket forward. Frederick took a close look. Cynthia Caven could have been an artist’s study in Snow White; pitch black hair and fair skin with bright blue eyes. Her daughter, it seemed, had taken after the father…which led him to the other half of the subject.

"If you feel no need to replace—and I object to that notion anyway—your mother, what about your father?"

She returned to her chair, plopping down and fingering the edges of the locket. "I don't know him."

"But what do you know *of* him? What would your mother talk about when she brought him up?"

Miss Caven laughed suddenly. "I guess that file they gave you wasn't so detailed. My mom used to joke about meeting my dad only once, in a cup. I was conceived at a fertility clinic."

Oh. That complicated matters. Or simplified them, it was too early to tell. How might a typical case of abandonment trauma work when the patient knew there had never been a parent in place to begin with?

He tapped his pen against his lips, thinking. If there was one thing he had learned about Miss Caven in the past month, it was that she was far from the 'little robot' her prowess in math and sciences suggested. In fact, she was incredibly imaginative. Several of the early notes from her professors described her as patient and self-sufficient, which suggested a heightened ability to be content in one's own thoughts. People with dismal imaginations were typically impatient and grew agitated without constant external stimuli.

"We often create a perception of our families—parents, siblings, etcetera—even if we don't actually have those relations." Frederick certainly had. When he was Ellery's age he had imagined his father was a regular guy with a boring job who came home every day. He imagined he hadn't thrown his family away for a blonde office temp half his age. He imagined what he looked like because it had all happened while Frederick was still in the womb, and his mother had destroyed every picture of that *bastardo podrido.*

"Your mother passed away only a short time ago," he continued, "You have a clear image of her in your mind, no need to create one, but when you think of a father figure, of *your* father, what do you imagine he's like?"

Miss Caven tucked her necklace away. "Are you asking for an educated guess or an ideal?"

Interesting. "Let's call it a partial ideal. Not pure fantasy, but something...touchable. In your best possible reality, what would your father be like?"

Seconds passed as she stared at the coffee table between them, her expression thoughtful. Just when he was ready to prompt her for a response, she looked up, eyes glinted with amusement.

"Determined," she said. "Whatever he's like, whatever he's doing, my father would be determined."

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Something wasn't right.

Will Graham was an intelligent psychopath who had remained suppressed for years, who had been suddenly and violently unlocked by his proximity to the cases he investigated—Frederick *knew* that—but…but that narrative didn't support having an accomplice. Graham had been caught, easily. For Christ's sake, the man had thrown up an ear and then sat quietly while his own psychiatrist turned him in! That didn't exactly speak to long game Machiavellian strategy. If Will Graham could orchestrate doubt of his guilt by directing others in the world, he could damn well have avoided being caught in the first place. Right?

But someone had murdered the bailiff.

And *someone* had opened the judge's skull like an old key-turn pudding cup.

"Doctor Chilton?"

Frederick snapped his attention to Miss Caven, who examined him as if she had been doing so for a while. "Sorry about that. I'm a little tired today, and…what did you say?"

"I said you can call me Ellery."

He smiled before he could stop himself. “Thank you.”

“And I’ll call you Freddie.”

“God no.”

“Frederick.”

“I’m not sure that would be appropriate.” And he was sick to death of hearing his name in Will Graham’s mocking voice. Between him and Alana Bloom, Frederick was beginning to wonder if his first name hadn't yet been added to the dictionary as a new slur.

Miss Caven lifted her chin. “Not appropriate because you’re older than me?”

“Because I am your therapist and it would be unusual.”

“All right, but you have to give somewhere. Doc.”

“Ugh.” He rolled his eyes so hard he saw stars.

“Mmm. You need to relax, Doctor Frederick Chilton, MD, Ph.D, APA, Director of the Baltimore State Hospital for—“

“Alright, alright.” He laughed, holding up his hands in surrender. “Point taken. But I’ll have you know I earned all those letters, just as you are currently doing.”

“Now you can add three more. D, O, C.” She raised two fingers in the boy scout’s salute. “I give my word to never mention Bugs Bunny of carrots even once.”

He sighed, but wasn’t nearly as irritated as he thought he should be. And her willingness to lessen their formality was a good sign for further therapy. “Agreed. Now, I want to go back to our discussion about your mother’s family.”

“If you insist, Doc.”

****

He should have canceled his appointments. Hell, he should take some of the accumulated vacation time that the board had been nagging him to use for years and just disappear somewhere for a few weeks. He had managed to keep his calm with Lecter, playing off their confrontation at the hospital as not a confrontation at all. They were colleagues, compatriots, joined in their shared use of unorthodox, unethical—*fucking illegal*—therapy methods.

‘You are not the only psychiatrist accused of making a patient kill.’

At least Frederick had genuinely believed—okay, heavily suspected—that Gideon really was the Chesapeake Ripper when he had left kernels of suggestion in his memory. Hannibal had ignored, then encouraged, Will Graham's raging encephalitis out of nothing more than sheer curiosity, because he had wanted to study what would happen to a mind as unique as Graham's under such rare conditions. Frederick wasn't proud of his error, but he could at least say he was the lesser of the two evils here, couldn't he? Not that it would matter to the Maryland Psychiatric Board.

Graham was a killer, Frederick held no doubt of that, but *had* he been a killer all along? Or only after having the dark recesses of his mind cracked open by infection and deliberate tampering?

He shuffled into the office, his core radiating pain as it hadn't in weeks. Knowing what he did now left him feeling something with which he had little experience and even less tolerance: shame. He had mocked Graham, stalked around his cage to confuse his eye space and keep him on edge, and all the while indulging in the sight of Graham's pretty face and deep blue eyes. Even when he smiled at Frederick with open contempt, the effect was captivating…and monumentally unfair.

'...the charm being debatable, of course.'

Frederick cringed and swallowed down a sudden rise of his vegan lunch. Maybe he was developing a stress ulcer. A *shame ulcer.*

"Buenas tardes, Doc." Ellery swung her legs down from the window seat as she closed the cover on a large sketch pad. He wasn't startled this time, since he now entered the room every week on the assumption that she was already there.

"You speak Spanish?"

"I will. The library has everything."

Frederick paused at that. "You aren't taking a class?"

"I already have a year of Latin, so my advisor wouldn't let me switch. It's 'more impressive', she says." Ellery took her seat across from him, setting her things down on the coffee table.

"So you're going to learn on your own. What prompted this?" Frederick opened his folio by habit, though he now rarely took notes during their sessions. There was no academic paper being written here and, oddly enough, he found it more satisfying to just listen to the patient when he wasn't trying to pick out signs of the psychopath triumvirate.

"Well…you speak Spanish, and I talk to you. No one speaks Latin." She fiddled unnecessarily with her cuff, breaking eye contact. That was worth a note.

"I do, yes." At least he had one patient that wanted to talk to him. In two languages no less. "Is that something else you learned when you were hunting down my birthday?"

“No. When I told you about Mrs. Morgan refusing to sign my permission slip for the museum outing, you said *¡Qué Mierda!* ”

Frederick gawked. “I did?”

“You were muttering.”

Cursing in front of a patient. Maybe he really should go on vacation. “I see. Well, I do apologize for my language. Since you’ve obviously translated it.”

“I did, and no apology necessary. It was bullshit.” She lifted her chin and declared proudly, “I’ve already made my way through some Spanish classics, in the original.”

Frederick gave her an incredulous, though amused, look. She was an academic prodigy, not a cyborg. “Really? In one week?”

“Yes, though I can’t decide on a favorite. It’s a cross between ‘the dog is brown’ and ‘Pardon me, sir or madam.’ I read that one twice.”

Frederick laughed, and kept laughing until his belly hurt and he had the back of his hand over his mouth. Real, genuine, honest to God laughter. How long had it been?

“If you like that one,” he said, still chuckling, “wait until you read ‘the boy’s shirt is blue’. It’s life changing.”

Ellery beamed.

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"Does it make you angry? Knowing that your mother's family could easily take you in, but won't?"

"No."

It should. Knowing what he now did about the Cavens, Frederick had to work to keep his expression professional. It wouldn't do to influence the patient with his own disgust. How does a family rolling in money throw their daughter into the street? How do they leave their own granddaughter to state custody like she doesn't exist? *How does a father abandon his family and use a crooked lawyer to leave them near penniless?*

"I find that hard to believe, Ellery."

"They were bad enough that my Mom wanted to leave. She wanted to be a mother but she didn't want the rich heir from the rich family her parents had arranged. She was in her thirties and they were still controlling her every move." Ellery hesitated, her gaze distant. "She used

to worry that one day I might want to meet some of them, so she told me a lot. Not everything, I could tell, but she said enough."

"Still, it must be hard, knowing that they have..." He stopped himself. What was he trying to do? *Make* her upset? It was not his past under discussion. "Would you speak to them if they wanted to meet you?"

Ellery shook her head. "No. I have that 'perception' you talked about now, of what my family would be like, and they wouldn't be it."

Frederick smiled, impressed. Good. Good for her. He had spent his childhood clinging to the crumbs of his father's attention; the rare birthday card, the promises to visit him at his new beach front house in Miami, always broken. He had even sent his father a letter when he got accepted to medical school, certain that would finally make him worth attention. It had gone unanswered.

His phone rang, the tone identifying it as the hospital. Damn it. They knew not to call him unless it was an emergency. "Sorry, this will just take a moment. Chilton."

His assistant spoke on the other end, words fast and whispered, as if he was trying not to be overheard. FBI agents were at the hospital. They had a warrant to search the employee lockers. Mathew Brown, one of the orderlies, had been shot and arrested barely an hour ago as he tried to kill Dr. Lecter.

An employee at his hospital, a man he had allowed to be hired, was a killer. He hung up while his assistant was still talking, the phone almost falling from his grasp. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid we'll have to stop early tonight."

Ellery stood as he did, reaching for her coat. "Are you alright, Doc?"

"No." Why the hell did he say that? "I mean, just an minor issue at the hospital I need to take care of. Our usual time next week?"

She nodded, pulling on her coat and scarf, more garments that he suspected had belonged to her mother. Most of her clothes were a bit too large for her. Winter was toying with them this year, and it had been nothing but freezing rain for days. Ellery pulled a collapsible umbrella from her bag, one of those flimsy things given away as promotional swag. She hadn't even opened it and he could already see it was mangled on one side.

"Here, take this. That thing wouldn't hold up to a strong sneeze." He handed her his umbrella, then realized he had taken it that morning in substitute of his walking stick. No matter. He was getting better every day. He could make it to his car without a fuss.

"See you next week, Doc." Ellery looked at the handle, perhaps searching for the little button to release the spring when they got outside. "*Gracias.*"

"*De nada.*"

It wasn't until he was shut in his car and clicking his seatbelt in place that he realized he had just handed off his custom made, six-hundred dollar Francesco Maglia umbrella.

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No. No, no, this isn't happening.

But it was happening. In less than a week, it had all happened. He could still hear Gideon's tin-can voice describing Hannibal's dining room, still see the exasperated look of disbelief on Crawford's face when he had played him the recording. And Hannibal, winking at him from across his packed parlor like the dead-eyed psychopath he was.

'Confession is good for the soul.'

'Convince Jack any way you can, like your life depends on it.'

Graham's parting words had been less than helpful. Give up his career, his medical license, and be left with...what? Nothing. He would have nothing. His career was all he was, all he had. And even if he wanted to confess now, he had no proof. Just his word, saying that Hannibal had admitted to psychic driving and medical negligence. Who would believe him, even if he destroyed his career in the process?

Not Crawford. The man had sat across from him not four hours ago, that damn patronizing smirk on his face, and ignored everything Frederick had to say. Crawford's faith in Graham's word seemed almost fanatically solid, *except* when those words had anything to do with Lecter. Crawford was trying to cherry-pick from his pet genius, because he refused to believe his *charming friend* might be a killer.

And he had dismissed Frederick's plea for FBI protection, like he was an annoying child asking to have his closet checked.

Frederick stopped at the snow covered steps, catching his breath. What the hell was he doing here? He needed to be on a plane, tonight, destination anywhere but here. When his phone had chimed outside Quantico with his usual calendar notice, he had gotten into his car and just drove. He'd made it all the way to the John Hopkins campus with hardly a memory of the near two hour drive. He was in no fit state to see a patient. In fact—

He looked up, darting his eyes around the snow-covered lawn. What if Hannibal was already preparing to kill him, already planning where to snatch him up? He remembered the gun he had bought not long after Gideon attacked him. It was currently residing, secure and worthless, in a lockbox under his bed. If Hannibal tried something here, now, he would be defenseless.

So would Ellery.

Would Hannibal kill someone, a child, just to remove a witness? What was he thinking, of course he would! He had torn out young Cassie Boyle's lungs while she was still using them. He needed to get out of there.

"Doc?"

Frederick looked up to the open door. She must have seen him through the window and come out. He must have made a hysterical sight.

"Ellery, I'm glad I ran into you out here." He forced a smile. "I'm afraid I must cancel our session for today and...maybe next week. A scheduling conflict I can't help."

Her expression, already placid enough, fell. She looked down at the large art portfolio she held, then back to him. "Okay. No problem."

"I will call you next week to confirm, so you don't make the trip for no reason." If they caught Lecter by then. If Frederick wasn't hiding in some cabin in the woods with no cell signal.

She came down the stairs, pushing up the too-long sleeves of her coat as she balanced the folio. "Better to send an email. My phone is out of minutes."

His frantic mind, for some ludicrous reason, managed to press through thoughts of cannibals and murder long enough for him to remember that Ellery's foster parents gave her a weekly allowance of fifteen dollars. A paltry amount he could barely fathom, but which Ellery somehow managed to stretch between bus fair, school supplies, and the occasional bag of candy.

Before he could lecture himself on the gross professional impropriety, Frederick reached into his breast pocket and blindly pulled some bills from his money clip. The Fates, Destiny, whatever they called themselves, had been having a banner week screwing with the mortals. At least he could help one person thwart the cosmic joke for a while. He pressed the bills into her hand.

"You really should have minutes on your phone, for emergencies. I'll try to see you next week at our usual time." He could search for plane tickets in the car. He had his ipad in the briefcase. Yes, that would work.

"Doc, before you go,"—she unlatched the closure on the folio—"I wanted to show what I—"

"I'm sorry, but I do have to go right now." He stared down at his phone, wondering if Hannibal was the sort of person who could track someone that way. "We'll discuss it next time, alright? Have a good week."

He hurried back to his car, cursing himself for not having one of those travel apps already on his phone. He just needed to get home first, pack some things, send a few messages to the hospital board and others saying he was going on vacation. If Jack Crawford wouldn't do anything to protect him, he would have to do it himself.

****

Ellery sat in the chair that had become Doc Chilton's and glanced at the ugly clock above the fireplace. Their appointment time had come and gone. Again. No call, no email. It made sense there wouldn't be. The things people were saying, the headlines in the newspaper...Doc wasn't coming. She opened the fresh new sketch pad on her lap and stared at the blank whiteness of the page until her vision began to blur.

They're wrong.

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After

Chapter Summary

Sort of a prologue montage, covering first part of season 3 up to "Digestivo", from Chilton's perspective.
Canon events (Hannibal in Italy, Will going after him, etc.) all still taking place.

~AFTER~

Frederick woke under harsh hospital lights and an unwelcome sense of clarity. He stared at the ceiling for some time, unmoving, blinking in the hopes of regaining his focus, but it didn't take long to realize he was blind in his left eye. When he could hold back no longer, he tried to swallow. His tongue stuck in his mouth like sandpaper, sending him into a fit of coughing. Reflex had him reaching to cover his mouth, but his hand jerked back with a painful dig against his wrists. Both his hands were cuffed to the bed rails.

Frederick began to scream.

In hindsight, he would have preferred the mental cloud of drugs, something to dull his perceptions and give him a few moments of peaceful uncertainty. Instead, he recognized all too easily the looks of distain and fear, sometimes mixed, in the nurses and doctors that came to him. They held cups of water with a straw to his mouth, pulling them away too soon and too harshly, their eyes either meeting his with cold disapproval or avoiding them with poorly concealed fear.

So he was still the Chesapeake Ripper. The cuffs confirmed that.

Someone eventually told him what had happened, though he couldn't remember who or why they had bothered. He had been shot in the face by an FBI agent he had supposedly held captive for two years, the same young agent who had positively identified him as her tormentor. The agent or doctor, whoever, had reeked of satisfaction as he spoke.

Ha-ha, your victim got you. Rot in Hell.

Frederick cried at night, when the lights were the low and the guard was less likely to notice.

The sense of hopelessness that had invaded him in the hours after his arrest continued uninterrupted. He didn't bother declaring his innocence to the nurses who came to change his bandages, nor any of the guards who sat watch on him from a chair next to the door. The

bullet had destroyed all his upper left-side teeth and taken out part of his cheekbone, creating a panic-inducing void in the upper left side of his mouth. The first time he had tried to reject the food they brought him, his words had been little more than a messy slur.

Even if he could speak, there would have been no point.

No one came to ask questions or demand answers. At first he thought that was strange. He remembered Alana's angry face, glaring at him in the interrogation room with all the distain that professional courtesy had forced her to mask over the years. He wondered if she now felt the heady satisfaction of having her years of dislike publicly vindicated.

****

Frederick lost the ability to keep track of time, or he just didn't care to. The pain meds were enough to make sure he slept more than he was awake, at least in the beginning. The guard would release one of his hands for meals, watching him like a hawk as he spooned flavorless pureed mysteries past his lips. He had no appetite and swallowing was a tricky exercise over the stitches and silicone guards in the roof of his mouth, but after the doctors threatened to give him a nasogastric tube for force feeding, he ate what he was given.

One evening, days or weeks later, he thought he saw a pair of deep blue eyes staring down at him through the opioid fog, and felt a warm pressure around his cuffed hand. He blinked and it became a head of curly black hair disappearing through the door.

Just a dream. He didn't think about it again.

****

A few weeks after he woke up—Two? Five?—something changed. They removed the cuffs while he was sleeping, and the chair next to the door sat empty. When the nurse came to lower the bed railing and help him shuffle to the bathroom, Frederick hesitated, confused and frightened by the absence of the guard and his gun. Hannibal had taken Gideon from a hospital room, had butchered the guard…

The nurse offered no explanation for the changes, but as she raised the railing back in place and repositioned the heart monitor on his finger, she gave him a strained smile, her face a portrait of silent apology.

Pity. Remorse. Shame.

They know.

Frederick turned away, rolling onto his side for the first time in weeks. He managed to hold back his tears until the door clicked shut.

They were not tears of joy. Everything had changed and nothing had changed. There was no joy.

****

New doctors came to visit him; plastic surgeons and orthopedic specialists, all smiling enthusiasm and painfully kind. They explained the schedule of surgeries they had planned for him, the scar on his cheek and the partial denture prosthesis that would replace his missing teeth and shattered maxilla. The ophthalmologist opened a narrow case for his inspection, causing him to flinch at the sight of green eyes staring up at him. They could match his good eye perfectly, he was told, a simple hard lens that would move naturally with the bad eye. The pupil would remain static in size, of course, but who would notice?

Frederick agreed to everything. When they gave him the usual forms to sign, he flipped one over and quickly wrote: Hannibal Lecter?

The mood in the room dropped. The pause turned uncomfortably long, until Frederick slapped his hand against the clipboard.

"Dr. Lecter attacked several people. He escaped and the FBI is still—"

Frederick's vision narrowed, his ears filling with white noise. He passed out to the muffled sounds of alarms and running feet.

****

They performed surgery on his soft palate using donated grafts. After only a week of healing he could make himself more or less understood, though the sound of his own wet slurred voice disgusted him. He talked as little as possible, which appeared to suit the government watchdog now talking to him.

Kade Prurnell stood at the foot of his bed and explained the ‘current status of the situation’ with all the clipped efficiency of a police report. Frederick wouldn't have been surprised if her words existed verbatim in a file somewhere. In an attempt to apprehend Hannibal Lecter "at great personal risk to themselves", Jack Crawford and Will Graham had both been severely injured and were currently fighting for their lives in the ICU. Abigail Hobbs had been alive all along, only to be killed by Dr. Lecter before he fled. Alana Bloom had been thrown from a second story window and might not walk again.

"As I'm sure you'll agree, Agent Crawford and Mr. Graham have suffered substantially in their pursuit of Dr. Lecter, and while some of their methods—"

"Furowlon?"

"I'm sorry?"

"F—" Frederick huffed, remembering his oral exercises. "For 'ow lonn? I was the r-ripper, right? When did 'awford know it wasn't me?" Was it weeks ago? Months? Had Crawford already turned his suspicions to Hannibal while Frederick was still cuffed to his bed and using the toilet under gunpoint? How long did they allow the world think he was a monster after they knew better?

Prurnell's demeanor turned stony after that. She assured him that the FBI took assault and injury of those in their custody very seriously and that there would be a thorough investigation. Frederick assured her she would hear from his lawyer.

****

More surgeries took place and another month passed. The ophthalmologist delivered the prosthetic cover for his eye. He had to admit, the result was impressive. It would be a bit longer before his palate was healed enough to take a mold for his prosthesis, so the left side of his face remained drooped and heavy, like a deflated balloon.

No one came to visit him and he received no calls.

There was no mention of his hospitalization in the newspapers the staff brought him. The FBI was probably keeping the entire situation under wraps in a cynical attempt to cover their asses, but it wouldn't have mattered either way. No one was coming.

He couldn't bring himself to care.

****

On the day he was released, he asked the nurse to call him a cab. She told him, with some confusion, that he was allowed to make personal calls now, he could have a friend or family pick him up. He reiterated his request for a cab.

Frederick stepped out into a brisk spring day wearing his own clothes. The charcoal track sweater and trousers he had worn when Jack Crawford cuffed him in the snow behind Will Graham's house, the same black T-shirt and boxer briefs in which he had shivered while Price and Zeller catalogued his belongings and scraped the underside of his nails.

If the cab driver recognized his face, he kept quiet about it.

Thirty minutes later found him standing before his front door, keys held frozen in front of him. He knew Hannibal wasn't there, knew the bodies and blood were long gone, but the numbness that had been creeping over his mind like ice water seemed to have flooded his limbs. A gust of wind rattled something, drawing his attention to a piece of paper tucked into the crease of the door.

He pulled it free. A note from a realtor, the same one he had used when he bought the house, offering her enthusiastic services should he "understandably" wish to sell.

Frederick crumpled the note in his fist and flung it onto his once maintained lawn. His kidney, his eye, seven teeth and four feet of small intestine…all gone. Taken.

No one was taking his house.

No one was taking anything from him again.

****

They don't tell you in movies and TV shows what happens to a person's life when they've been snatched out of it. They don't talk about the power being shut off from lack of payment, or the water. They don't talk about the refrigerators filled with spoiled food or the cell phone accounts that have been terminated. Frederick's life had been run with well-oiled automation, but even that couldn't stand up to frozen bank accounts and cancelled credit cards.

Will Graham had had people looking out for him. After two months in Frederick's hospital, Graham had stepped back into his house and his life without a hitch. There wouldn't have been any late payment notices from the bank stuffed in Graham's mailbox.

Frederick shuffled to the garage, ready to spend his first day of freedom replacing his phone so he could have his utilities reactivated, only to find the garage empty. The FBI still had his car, and, judging from the bare racks in his closet, his entire wardrobe. He wondered how many of his suits Price and Zeller had destroyed in their futile hunt for more evidence...their righteous determination to prove he had butchered their friend.

Eventually, he found the tablet he used just for ebooks and was shocked to see it still had a sliver of battery life left. He picked up the weak wifi signal from the old lady next door and just managed to order a rental car before the screen blinked out.

****

"On behalf of the board, I want to say how relieved we are to see you recovering so well. Of course, we fully understand if you want to step back from this area of psychology. After what

you've been through, no one would hold it against you. We've discussed a generous severance package."

"No, thank you."

Dr. Rolland frowned, her botoxed forehead actually managing a crease. "You don't wish to take a severance package?"

"I don't need a severance package because I have no intention of resigning." Frederick wasn't surprised to see the flash of annoyance around her pursed lips. She had been tacitly pushing for his departure for years. She wanted an administrator, a bureaucrat who would stamp the forms, approve the menus, and smile quietly at the fundraisers, not a clinical psychologist working to make a name for himself in the field.

Well, maybe she would get what she wanted after all.

"Do you think that's the best idea?" Another of the faux concerned faces lining the table leaned forward. "After all, what with your...involvement in this business with Dr. Lecter, it might be best for you and the patients if—"

"My contract clearly states, criminal charges that have been dropped or dismissed may not be used as a just cause for termination." Frederick pretended to scratch at his cheek while carefully pushing his prosthesis back in place. It was slipping down again. He would need to make an appointment for another fitting.

Dr. Rolland gaped like a fish, no doubt torn between firing him on the spot and calculating the hospital's losses to a wrongful termination suit. Only three months ago he would not have dared to make such a blunt threat. He would have been too concerned for his reputation, his standing in the field, his constant need to curry favor with the right people who knew other right people.

None of that mattered anymore.

The job didn't matter either, not really. But it was his, and he was done losing what was his.

****

Frederick stood in the bright florescent light of the corridor, carrying a large bouquet of flowers and wondering what the hell he was doing there. He had been doing that a lot lately; operating on auto-pilot, going through the motions of polite society and what he remembered from before. Civilized people visited the ill in the hospital. They brought flowers, because that was the thing people did. You commiserated, told them they would get better even if it was a lie. You shared.

It may not have been Hannibal's finger on the trigger, but he had sent the bullet through Frederick's face just as sure as he had sliced the knife through Graham's belly. They certainly

shared something now.

And it was that thought that had Frederick halting in his steps halfway across the room. Was that why he was there, because he thought they had something in common now? Because he wanted to *commiserate*? No. It couldn't be that, because commiseration suggested an equality of experience, a balanced human playing field on which, Frederick now accepted, he had never stood. Graham, Bloom, Crawford; they were titled pieces dancing around Hannibal's king, and Frederick was a disposable pawn.

What a fool he had been. There was and never had been any equity between him and Graham, either in sentiment or situation. Graham fell in a bloody encounter with the monster himself because of a botched plan and his own dysfunctional judgment. Frederick fell because Graham had chosen to make a phone call.

Graham suddenly stirred in his bed, bare-chested and pale. Even gutted and bedridden the man was inhumanely beautiful.

Frederick tore the card from the bouquet and slipped it into his pocket. He tossed the flowers into a chair on his way out.

****

"Dr. Chilton! Frederick!" Freddie Lounds danced across the parking lot as if she had been born in five inch platform heels. "I'm glad I caught you. I've been trying to get in touch."

"I have a new phone number now." Not that he had had much choice. His old number continued to draw lunatic messages from people who probably belonged in his hospital.

"Oh?" Freddie pulled out her phone, fingers ready. "Go ahead."

"What do you want, Ms. Lounds?"

"We were talking about collaboration on your story after Gideon, but now I'm thinking a longer piece, more cohesive, bringing in the new material."

New material.

"No, thank you."

Ms. Lounds scoffed, as if he had made a bad joke. "You don't want to collaborate on this? I have *very* interested feelers from two major publishers. We get them to duke it out, this could turn into a seven figure deal before royalties. The FBI isn't releasing anything, but if you told your story—"

"No." An old part of his brain, high pitched and so foreign now that Frederick barely recognized it, screamed in protest. Was he insane? This could make him. He could fill the

pages with his own observations and reiterate the original profile he had written for the FBI, the profile that had turned out to be so accurate.

But that voice was just an echo now, like bad memories of drunken faux pas.

"You...you can't be serious." Freddie looked him up and down, eyes narrowed as those precision cogs turned in her head. She pulled a recorder from her pocket. "What about an interview?"

"Good day, Ms. Lounds." He headed up the stairs.

"Do you plan to sue the FBI for wrongful arrest? Were they using you all along to make Lecter drop his guard?"

He could feel a headache coming on. They were common now, pulsing around the edges of the steel plate in his head.

"What harm has your arrest had on your patients? Have you been forced to refer them to other doctors?"

She was clever, he gave her that.

"What about your private practice? Do you think it can ever recover?"

Frederick actually snorted a laugh at that one. He had only had one private patient, and he could only imagine what kind of hell she had been put through after he was arrested. Being told you had spent two months' worth of Wednesdays getting therapy from a serial killer would scar anyone for life. Although, judging from the steel in Ellery's character, she had probably torched his umbrella in a lab experiment and moved on.

I wonder if she kept up with her Spanish.

"Good day, Ms. Lounds."

"You'll want to tell your story, Frederick. It's going to get written either way."

"Bye, Freddie."

****

"You have no basis for such an accusation, Councilor. The material evidence implicating Dr. Chilton *was* overwhelming." Prurnell closed a folder and laced her fingers over it. She sat behind Jack Crawford's desk, even as the man himself sat stiffly in one of the guest chairs, a bandage still tapped around the side of his neck.

What cheesy corporate seminars on power-plays did she attend?

Frederick's lawyer snorted, going for the throat. "Really? Agent Crawford's own reports going back years highlight that one of the signatures of the Chesapeake Ripper was a total lack of forensic evidence, and yet,"—he made a sweeping gesture—"no one found it suspiciously convenient that 'the ripper' would suddenly turns his own home into a bloodbath?"

Frederick gripped the armrest.

"And afterward, not even changing his clothes before running for help *to* an FBI profiler? That's the genius killer you've been chasing for six years, Agent Crawford?"

Feet shifted in his peripheral vision, but Frederick refused to look higher than that. Graham had not uttered a single word since the meeting started.

"Mr. Fuller, we are not in a court room and you are not speaking for the benefit of a jury. In the course of investigations, it is possible that multiple suspects might be brought in. Dr. Chilton was only a suspect at that point. To hear you talk you would think we're discussing wrongful prosecution. It never got that far."

"No, it didn't." Fuller opened his hands. "The FBI skipped indictment and trial and went straight for the execution."

Frederick was going to be sick. His head pulsed, like someone was moving ice behind his bad eye.

Prurnell sucked an audible breath through her thin nose. "I would appreciate it if we could keep our separate topics separate, Councilor. No one is questioning culpability in Dr. Chilton's accident…"

Accident.

"…Ms. Lass was being kept in protective custody and thus we acknowledge that responsibility for her actions ultimately falls to…"

Hannibal. Lass was always going to implicate him, Frederick knew that now. It's why Hannibal had kept her alive. Frederick had been his fall back plan for years.

"It was my fault." Crawford's raspy voice filled the room, silencing the two suited sharks. "I knew she had been through too much, was too unstable. I didn't stop her in time, and now she has to live knowing she shot an innocent man. I'm sorry, Doctor."

Sorry? Cold sweat prickled Frederick's scalp. What was he sorry for? Not being swift enough to stop a traumatized woman from firing a gun? Having another of his precious FBI pets further damaged? *That*'s *what he's sorry for!?*

Frederick shot to his feet and stumbled around the chair, pulling his coat off the back.

"Dr. Chilton? Are you ill?"

"No, I have to go."

Fuller jumped up. “We really need to finish here. If you need a short break—“

“No, we’re done. I’ll take the settlement.”

Fuller’s eyes looked ready to drop out of his head. “Frederick, I think we should discuss this first. They obviously used you—“

“Doesn’t matter. The settlement’s fine.” He lost his balance as he headed for the door, stumbling against a chair in one final indignity.

“Frederick…” Graham’s voice, almost as rough and unused as Crawford’s, filled his head like a fog horn.

“Just take the settlement. I’ll sign whatever later. I need to get my car.”

****

Frederick heaved the bank box of former evidence into the passenger seat and dropped down behind the wheel of his vintage Porsche. The scent of whatever chemicals they had used to swab the upholstery lingered, leaving a sour taste in his mouth. The corners of the heavy box marred the soft leather of the seat in a way that would have had him sputtering outrage once upon a time.

It’s just a stupid car.

Besides, the trunk was stuffed with what remained of his suits.

He wrestled to remove his jacket, suddenly overheated, and knocked the crushed lid of the bank box into the floorboard. The box contained important documents that had been taken from his house; mortgage statements and invoices, checkbooks and the deed to the lake house he had bought but never found time to visit. Atop all of that were rubber-banded stacks of his mail, which the FBI had collected since his arrest.

He thumbed through one of them, huffing at the progressively angry fonts used by his bank, when his eyes caught on a dark blue envelope among the bundles of white and manila. Fumbling it out of the banded stack, he had to blink and reread the return address several times before he was sure of what he was seeing.

From: Ellery Caven…

The envelope had already been sliced open by some considerate FBI tech, allowing him to pull free a piece of white matte cardstock, carefully folded and showing the texture of something homemade from an inkjet printer. The front held an image of a birthday cake covered in a comical number of candles. The cake was wrapped in crime scene tape—hand drawn with colored pencils?— with a small placard identifying the cake as *Exhibit A*. Beneath all that, a caption in official looking font read:

The evidence shows without a shadow of a doubt that it is…your birthday. The people will also show you are guilty of…

He opened the card to the inside.

…nothing else, because you didn't do it.

I know you didn't do all the things they're saying, Doc. Everyone is being really stupid. Feliz cumpleaños, though I doubt it. –E.C.

Frederick stared at the card, blinking until his hand started to shake. Then he started to laugh.

He laughed until his cheek ached and the sound broke in a manic sob. He flipped the envelope over and read the postmarked date. It had been mailed almost three months ago, a few days before his birthday, when he was still in a coma and the world believed he was the devil.

Someone had believed in him. An overachieving kid clawing her way out of childhood because she was afraid to be there alone, a kid who had declared with stark authority that 'people should get something on their birthday'.

A kid who owed him and the world nothing, not even doubt, but still…*someone* had believed.

Someone with one hell of a sense of gallows humor.

Frederick laughed again, *really* laughed. He had almost forgotten the sound.

****

The hospital staff was acting strangely.

For years, pretty much from his first day as director, the staff had regarded him with an avoid-at-all-costs policy. Problems were delegated, and if they could not be, they were brought through the filter of his assistant. Frederick had been a busy research psychologist, with no time to spare for piddling concerns about payroll and overtime and bereavement leave.

No time to spare for his actual job.

You're an asshole, Frederick.

But now, the staff was acting strangely. They greeted him in the halls, gave smiles and nods of recognition from across the parking lot. They brought issues *to him* when his assistant was already busy with half a dozen other things.

At first he thought it was pity, but there had been no pity after Gideon attacked him. In fact, the staff had done a rather pathetic job of hiding their guilty glee. So what if he had finally gotten around to having the broken shower heads in the staff locker room fixed? Or approved seven leave requests the same day he received them? Was it such a big deal that he had the laundry room driers replaced after overhearing a group of orderlies complain about damp sheets and mildew? It was the sort of stuff that would have bored him before, would have been beneath his worthy notice, because a man didn't gain fame and standing in the psychological community with long overdue pay raises or increasing the cafeteria budget by twenty percent.

He was just doing his job, the one he had ignored. It wasn't as if he had suddenly discovered the grand importance of staff uniform allowances or night shift rotations; he had always known those things *were* important, it was just that…that his career, his pursuit of recognition, had been *more* important.

Frederick didn't much care about recognition anymore.

He sent a thank you note to Ellery for the birthday card.

He had sealed it plain and formal, as all his thank you notes were. Then, on second thought, he discarded the first envelope and wrote on the back of the card: *There weren't nearly enough candles on that cake. I'm OLD.*

He wrote the message in Spanish.

****

At first, it had been Frederick's persistent feeling of numbness that kept him from reading anything to do with the FBI's search for Lecter. He simply didn't have the energy to care about something so detached from himself. Central though he might have been to much of it, he was still…detached. He assumed Graham and Crawford, even Dr. Bloom, were all in the thick of the international search in one way or another. None of them had contacted him for a group monster hunt, and he was pleased.

Fuck all of them.

But later, once his numbness had waned, he avoided any news of Lecter out of sheer cynicism. They were never going to find him, never going to catch him. It was wasted effort,

wasted pain. Frederick didn't live in fear, because he was not a loose end for Hannibal Lecter. He wasn't important enough to be a loose end.

Which was why he swiped *ignore* when Alana Bloom's number flashed on his phone. He had more pressing concerns, namely the fact he was about to be excoriated for sending a thank you note to a former patient.

Why else would Dr. Morse have asked—demanded—to see him?

Frederick entered the same office he had so many months ago, only this time he was not preening at the prospect of doing a favor for an important colleague. This time he was not wearing one of his best Italian suits or carrying an antique cane. He wore a sweater over one of his dress shirts with the top button undone.

He hadn't worn a tie in months.

He hadn't taken any of his suits to be cleaned either.

"Dr. Chilton, I'm…glad to see you so well recovered." Morse's smile was forced, yes, but it wasn't the angry scowl Frederick had expected.

Interesting.

"The miracles of modern medicine." Frederick dropped into a chair without being asked. He was tired. "What can I do for you, Doctor?"

Morse did frown now, probably in reaction to Frederick's lack of ass kissing. He cleared his throat. "I was hoping you had recovered well enough that you might consider taking on your private practice once more. If you feel ready, of course."

Private practice? Wow. "You…want me to continue therapy sessions with Miss Caven?"

"If you can fit it into your schedule again." Morse waved a hand as if he didn't care either way, but Frederick wasn't buying it. He would not have asked Frederick there on a whim.

Frederick opened his mouth, then hesitated. *Did* he want to continue private practice, even if it was one patient? His career, or at least most of it, had been about research. Poking and prodding and observing, analyzing and comparing. Not helping. He used to call what he did in the hospital 'therapy', but he had long ago given up on the spirit behind that word. The lunatics in his asylum were beyond help, and almost all of them would never walk free again regardless, so what would have been the point? Better to study the beast as it is and learn something—publish a paper—rather than try to blunt its teeth, right?

Some fucking doctor he was. Had he ever helped anyone, even once?

I was helping Ellery.

"I can, yes, if she doesn't object." Frederick watched Morse closely. "I can't imagine she didn't hear about my arrest and the charges. It must have been an ordeal for her."

“Nothing’s an ordeal for that girl,” Morse muttered, sounding a tad bitter. Frederick almost smiled. Maybe Ellery had expressed her ‘everyone is being really stupid’ opinion beyond just writing it in a birthday card.

Morse continued, “That won’t be a problem. The replacement therapists we arranged to see Miss Caven haven’t worked out.”

Replacements, plural? “I see.”

“She told her case worker, Ms. Metler, that she, eh…” He opened a folder on his desk and flipped up a page, lips pressed in disapproval. “She said she did not ‘want to spend two months repeating herself to someone dressed like a Kindergarten substitute.”

Frederick had to suck his cheek between his teeth to keep from laughing. “Miss Caven is young, but it would have been a mistake to treat her as many pediatric therapists do. She doesn’t appreciate condescension.”

“She doesn’t seem to *appreciate* that she is fifteen years old.” Morse closed the folder, his face once against twisting into something no one would mistake for a genuine smile. "I would greatly appreciate it if you could spare the time."

Frederick thought of his big house and the nightly echo of the TV he left on but hardly acknowledged. He thought of the growing ache in his back from over-sleeping, because he had nothing else better to do, and the right dosage of sleep medication could leave him dreamless for ten hours straight. He thought of how desperately he wanted to do something, anything, but couldn't seem to unfreeze his limps long enough to reach.

"Sure, I can spare the time."

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"How have you been doing, Ellery?"

"Better than you, I think."

Frederick narrowed his eyes in mock disapproval. "I applaud the clever segue, but we are here to discuss you."

"Okay." She removed her hands from their clasped position on her knee and pulled them against her stomach. It was the first nervous gesture he could recall seeing from her.

Frederick put his pen to the notepad, but hesitated, regretting his words. As much as he didn't want to discuss any part of what happened to him, he could not in good faith ignore a subject that had no doubt affected her life greatly, for months. He clicked his pen shut.

"Would you like to talk about what you went through after the charges against me were made public?"

Ellery's placid expression hardened. "You didn't do anything, and then they hurt you after you were arrested."

"Yes. How did that make you feel?"

She mimicked his narrow-eyed expression from a moment ago. "Not good."

Point, patient. "Dr. Morse tells me that you didn't mesh well with the three other therapists they asked you to see. Did that have something to do with your 'not good' reaction to my arrest."

"I wasn't asked to see them, I was ordered. And they weren't therapists, they were interrogators."

"What do you mean?"

"All they wanted to talk about was you, especially the one from the FBI." Ellery leaned forward, clasping her hands as she imitated a dramatic expression of concern. "'Miss Caven, do you recall if Dr. Chilton ever administered drugs to you? Miss Caven, do you recall any moments of lost time? Miss Caven, did Dr. Chilton ever encourage you to harm anyone?'"

Frederick stared for several seconds, too shocked to react.

No, too angry to react.

How dare they? How *fucking dare they!?* He drew a deep breath, taking the moment to calm himself. They had accused him of murder, kidnapping, *cannibalism*, the worst that worse could get, and yet the suggestion—accusation—that he could have done to Ellery what Hannibal was doing to Will Graham was particularly nauseating. At least with the other crimes it was just Frederick and charges he knew to be untrue, involving people who were already dead and gone. But Ellery was his patient, very much alive, and they had dragged her into his hell.

"I am...very sorry." He shook his head. "They believed at the time that I had done those things to others, so it makes sense that they would worry about you and my other patients. They were just doing their job."

"They were just being stupid," Ellery countered. "I answered their questions, and when they didn't like what I said they sent a different therapist. She wore a Winnie-the-Pooh sweater and talked to me like I was five."

That explained the note about the kindergarten substitute. "That must have been frustrating for you."

"They told me they 'understood' why it was difficult for me to accept that someone I talked to for two months could be a monster. Every time I said they were wrong, they found a way to tell me I was naive and in denial without actually using the words. Trusting, I think, was their

favorite word." She lifted her chin, her expression once again going calm, but Frederick didn't miss the bob in her throat. "I don't think trusting too much is a problem I have."

Definitely not. In fact, Frederick had written a note in her file stating just that. So, why did she think he was innocent? She was a patient, she knew virtually nothing about him and held no basis to conclude he was innocent of heinous crimes that the whole world was sure he had committed. If she hadn't been working from a place of excessive trust or sentiment, what else?

He wanted to redirect their discussion to anything but him, but her frustration needed to be addressed. One can't sit in a burning building and talk about rain.

"Let's take a moment and try to,"—*Can't believe I'm saying this—"*see the situation from their perspective. To them, you had no good reason to disbelief something that everyone else around you seemed to believe. That alone was probably enough to make them suspicious of my behavior with you, to make them wonder if I had done something to convince you ahead of time."

"You mean like brain washing?"

He sighed. "In a manner of speaking."

She seemed to consider, her eyes dropping down to the coffee table. As good as it felt to have someone angry on his behalf, this wasn't about him.

"I understand what you're saying, Doc. You're telling me not to be so frustrated because they had their reasons," Ellery said, voice steady. "The real killer set everything up to make you look guilty, but the problem is that he didn't do a very good job and they still believed it. I told the psychologist from the FBI that the last day I saw you, you were leaning on your cane a lot and you looked like you were in pain. I told all of them that you limped and used your cane, and they still believed that you went to your house that same day and killed people. FBI agents with guns, and that you hauled their bodies around and did things to them. How? How did you do those other things they said you did, weeks before that, when you were even worse off?

"I gave them good reasons for thinking you were innocent, I laid it out just like a formula, and they looked at me like I was a sad, confused kid. That's what they do. I'm a genius, an overachiever, *so* mature, until I start saying something they don't like. Then I'm just a stupid kid again. I'm tired of being told how smart I am while everyone treats me like an idiot."

Well.

Damn.

He wondered if Jack Crawford knew there were better detectives than him in the John Hopkins freshman class. "I see. This seems to come back around to your age and how you feel it holds you back."

"It holds other people back."

"There's is nothing wrong with being young, Ellery. It's not something you need to escape. You may think they would have given you more credibility if you were older, but I can assure you that's not the case. Fifteen or fifty, it would not have made a difference."

She pressed her lips tight, once again seeming to give his words real consideration. “My age is the source of all my current problems, Doc. Escaping would be nice.”

“But you’re smart, Ellery. You just said your behavior doesn’t make a difference; people still treat you like a kid no matter how mature you act or how many grades you skip. You can’t force the clock, so…” He made an open gesture. “knowing that, why bother?”

She frowned a bit, but sat up straighter, more alert. “Why bother with what?”

“The front.” He clasped his hands over the notepad. Frederick knew a thing or two about false fronts, image, the desperate need to project a preformed self to get the reaction you wanted from others. He had also learned what an exhausting, miserable, and ultimately pointless exercise it was. Oh, Frederick was on personal terra firma with this.

“Do you have interests, hobbies, likes, that you keep to yourself because you’re afraid others will see them as childish?”

“No,” She said too quickly.

“Really? Nothing like making funny birthday cards?”

“That’s not childish,” she protested, “Adults do that kind of stuff all the time.”

“I agree, but adults also have age on their side, and the law. An adult being called childish isn’t threatening.” He softened his voice as he leaned forward. “Someone over eighteen can be as childish as they want, and their university probably won’t force them to see a therapist. The state won’t put them into foster care.”

Ellery dropped her maroon eyes to the coffee table again. He barely heard her when she muttered, “It’s not fair.”

Frederick sucked in a breath, the weight of her words breaking his heart a little. It wasn’t just her trapped position as a ward of the state, or the extra hoops she had to jump through for the university; he had a feeling those three words were about much more, everything. It wasn’t fair her mother had died. It wasn’t fair her only relatives refused to take her. It wasn’t fair her father was an unknown, unavailable option.

“One of the few, very few, benefits of recognizing a futile situation is that is can be freeing. When you know nothing you do can change anything, you free yourself to stop trying.”

Ellery’s brow shot up, amused and surprised. “Doc, that is some impressive cynicism.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not speaking generally, but on a case by case basis. You’ve already told me that the school, the foster system, won’t give you the same autonomy and treatment as an adult no matter what you do, so…don’t do it. Be yourself.”

“Be myself?” She seemed almost insulted, probably because he was implying she didn’t already act like herself.

“Look at it this way; in here, during these sessions, you never have to project any kind of image, never have to worry that you aren’t acting mature enough for John Hopkins. If you want to talk about your lab projects and the Handel concerto you’ve been practicing, that’s fine. If you want to spend an hour explaining Disney movies to me, that’s fine too.”

She tilted her head, eyes wide like an outraged lizard. “Disney movies? I’m not ten, and even then I…”

Frederick stifled a laugh, causing her to falter. She glared at him before realization struck. “Ah. Very funny, Doc.”

“Retribution for putting so many candles on that cake.”

Ellery laughed, and the sound compensated just a little bit for the unfair world.

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Freddie Lounds snatched up her soy latte and took a suspicious sip. Oh, they actually got it right today. Shocker. Finding a decent cup of coffee in Baltimore was harder than finding a decent story... at least, it was now. Lecter was still in the wind and she'd exhausted what little she could sniff out there.

Fucking Chilton. PTSD pansy.

The publishers were still interested in her book, but without direct corroboration and first-hand material from someone else involved, the book would lose major selling points. People were always suspicious about second-hand accounts, especially when the horse's mouth was *right there* and refusing to talk. She could hear the pathetic, low budget media tour now; side-eyed questions about credibility, exaggeration, about why the one surviving person who was there and could back her up was refusing to comment.

Fucking emo shrink extraordinaire.

Maybe she could work that in somehow, a bit of sentiment on how Lecter kills even those he leaves alive. Chilton sure as hell looked half dead when she'd seem him. Hair unstyled and overlong, shoes unpolished and trousers wrinkled. She'd gotten a picture before he took off. It would make for a good side-by-side comparison with the plaid suited dandy of five months ago.

Mmm. That might bring in a whole chapter.

Freddie stepped out of the shop and into the already frigid air. Her coffee was wrong more than half the time, but she chose that shop because it was next to the old-school newsstand

she preferred. The crotchety old guy running it didn't care how long you read or if you bought anything, so long as you put that damn paper back in the right stack. Freddie had lost count of how many story ideas she'd gotten standing in front of that wall of information, headlines filled with leads and tidbits that even the authors hadn't seen.

There's no source like open-source.

She passed over the hopeless national level grasping of the Baltimore Sun—*Seriously, just die already. You aren't the Washington Post*—and landed on the cutesy blue graphics of the East County Times. The front image showed a lab coated doctor standing next to a teenage boy, both smiling like someone had a gun to their heads to make it happen.

TWO BALTIMORE GENERAL SURGEONS BECOME UNEXPECTED FATHERS SIXTEEN YEARS LATER

Investigation Underway at Wiltmore Fertility Labs; Fraud Suspected.

Freddie rolled her eyes but picked up a copy anyway. Before she'd hitched her wagon to the serial killer horse she'd dabbled in everything from cancer media to one-percenter gossip columns. Skimming the article she chuckled over the rim of her cup. The story had a lot of the twists and turns that make for good legal drama, if you cared about that sort of thing.

Almost two decades ago, Baltimore General had brought suit against a medical supply company for selling them lead vests that turned out to contain practically no lead. Two x-ray techs and a doctor had developed cancer believed to be caused by constant exposure. In a bid to strengthen their case against the medical supplier, all the other doctors and lab techs then currently on staff had agreed—*under pressure, I'd bet*— to be tested for low sperm counts and fertility, early warning signs of radiation exposure. The samples had been sent to a private lab, Wiltmore Fertility Specialists, for impartial testing.

And some enterprising idiot at Wiltmore had fucked up royally. The allegations were claiming intentional misuse of samples, while Wiltmore and the former lab tech were trying to claim it was a regrettable mix-up.

Have fun in prison, buddy. Freddie could just imagine the abject baby-daddy fear now running through the upper echelons of the Baltimore medical community. High society in Baltimore was so wrapped up with the medical fields you could hardly tell them apart. All those rich families with Mayflower sounding names had at least one doctor that had been through Baltimore General, John Hopkins, or both. Hell, even Lecter had been an ER surgeon there before he—

"Oh, fuck me."

The crotchety old newsstand guy snorted a laugh. "You find somethin', Freddie?"

She dug a dollar out of her purse and handed it over. "You bet your ass I did."

Now

Chapter Summary

And the real Season 3 AU begins.

Chapter Notes

Now the present story begins. From this moment on there won't be any large unaccountable leaps in time. Hope you enjoy =)

"He surrendered, man. Just like…surrendered."

Lovely.

"I heard he was cornered, ya know?"

Unlikely.

"Had to be. I mean, that psycho wouldn't just walk up to the FBI."

He would.

"Why does he have to come here anyway? Federal pen doesn't have a strong enough box?"

If only.

"Chilton must be shitting himself right n—"

Frederick cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, we have about five minutes. Please be in your positions in the secure ward."

"Yes, Doctor," the three guards said in unison as they broke up their little group and continued down the stairs.

Frederick followed at a slower pace, waiting for his panic to catch up. It was there, he assumed, trailing behind him, silent and detached. Too detached. As a doctor he knew all the signs, knew there was something dangerously unhealthy about the cloud of apathy currently choking him.

There were worse kinds of unhealthy.

He could be curled in a ball under his desk.

Small mercies.

The sight of two federal marshals with rifles, both flanking the inside of the loading bay doors, put a hitch in his step. This was really happening, the impossible, the last thing on God's frigid gray earth was actually happening. Hannibal was about to become the latest resident of the BSHCI. That it was happening now, almost two months after his so-called surrender at Graham's house, didn't surprise Frederick in the least. He had given up on any expectation of the FBI following the law, or basic procedure, when it came to anything involving Hannibal. Arresting someone and keeping it secret for two months? Crawford wouldn't have blinked twice.

Frederick continued past the marshals and waiting orderlies to step out into the drab late winter sun. The van was already there, surrounded by a lot of loaded guns and false confidence. Hospital policy required that every high security prisoner transfer be personally signed off by the director to verify identity and current state of welfare.

Lucky me.

"Dr. Chilton."

Frederick nodded at the head marshal, a graying veteran who looked as if she had been eating antacids all day. He knew the feeling. With a hand signal, she ordered her men into action. They opened the back doors of the transport van and wheeled out the specially designed dolly. Hannibal was jacketed and secured in place, straps holding his shoulders back against the padded frame. He was not, however, wearing the bite mask, as per instructions.

Frederick couldn't manage more than an irritated purse of his lips. It should have been anger, or fear, but the numbness he had been shedding bit by bit in the past months had returned full force the moment he was informed of Hannibal's impending arrival. The moon could drop out of the sky and Frederick probably wouldn't manage more than a roll of his eyes.

The marshal handed him a clipboard like it was on fire. "Transfer order for Dr. Hannibal Lecter. This transfer is valid and authorized?"

"Yes." Frederick scribbled his signature on the appropriate line. He could feel Hannibal's eyes following him, could sense the amusement without even looking. He handed the clipboard back and stepped out of the way, ready to follow the armed cavalcade down to the secure tombs, but the marshal interrupted.

"I'm sorry to insist, Doctor, but I need this transfer to go a hundred percent by the book." She extended the clipboard to him again, eyes filled with apology.

Frederick snatched it back and flipped up the cover page to the patient welfare form. Yes, yes, by the book. They couldn't possibly deny Hannibal an opportunity to run his mouth.

"Are you Dr. Hannibal Lecter as stated on this transfer order?"

“You know who I am, Frederick.”

Check. “Do you understand what is happening and why you have been brought here?”

“Thoroughly.”

“Have you been injured or mistreated during the course of this transfer?”

A pause. “It is good to see you again. Our last meeting was rather rushed.”

Frederick repeated the question, gaze fixed on the straps at Hannibal’s shoulder.

“Your face now has character. It was lacking before, like new leather yet to see life.”

Frederick shifted his attention to somewhere on Hannibal’s forehead. *Numb, numb…*better than the alternative. “We can stand out here in the cold all day.”

“No, I have not been injured.”

He checked the box. “Do you believe your transfer to this facility to be in error?”

“The house you keep is for the insane. I am not insane, Frederick.”

Be sure to say that at your trial.

“Do you believe your tra—” Frederick’s phone rang from his pocket, the jaunty sounds of Mozart’s french horn concerto identifying the caller. It was like a sharp gust of wind coming to blow a hole in his cloud of apathy.

He swiped *accept* without a second thought. “Hello?”

“Doc, are you allergic to peanuts?”

“What?”

“I’m buying snacks and I need to know if you’re allergic to peanuts.”

Frederick shifted out of the wind and let out a put-upon sigh. “No, I’m not. And I’ll say again that our sessions are intended for discussion, not eating snacks.”

“Multi-tasking is a life skill, Doc. You should be encouraging me,” Ellery replied in her signature deadpan, though he could always hear the amusement behind it.

She had taken to bringing various candies and pastries to their sessions, always with the intent to share and the tacit suggestion that she was using him an culinary guinea pig. She had also taken to calling him occasionally, usually with questions pertaining to their sessions, but sometimes not. The first time had been to tell him that ‘some idiot’ had broken into her locker at the campus pool, but she wasn’t sure if she should report it since all they took was a swimsuit and a her hairbrush. The last time she had called was to ask him if minors could

board the train to New York alone. He had told her yes, they could, but she should absolutely *not do that.*

Frederick knew he was toeing the line of standard doctor-patients boundaries, but their sessions had made it clear she had no interest in seeking guidance from her foster guardians. And if not them, where else could she go? Google?

“Doctor?” The head marshal held her hands palms up, an obvious ‘what the fuck?’ written on her face.

Frederick raised a finger. “I do have to go right now. I'll see you at our usual time.”

“Are you busy picking up your nice suits from the cleaners?”

“Not this again.”

“They took your eye, not your fashion sense. I liked your old clothes better.”

That was another thing he found refreshing about his only patient. She could actually make him laugh about losing a damn eye. He suspected that, given enough time, she would find a way to make him smile about the missing kidney too.

Damn kid.

“I had no idea chemists were so witty. Goodbye, Ellery.”

“Byyyee.”

He dropped his phone back in his pocket and looked up, realizing only then that he had turned his back on Hannibal. Frederick spun around, forgetting to focus off in the distance, and came eye to eye with him. Dark cherry brown eyes, like blood varnished wood. *Maroon.*

Frederick shivered suddenly, and not from the biting wind.

Hannibal was paler than Frederick remembered and almost alien without his vibrant suits and styled hair. But Frederick was no fool. Jacketed, chained, and boxed, Hannibal was still Hannibal. Nothing about him had been lessened. Even in defeat, he eyed the world like a hawk eyeing mice.

It was that thought that finally allowed a hot stab of rage to pierce Frederick’s numb shell.

“Do you believe your transfer to this facility to be in error?”

Hannibal tilted his head, as much as he was able, and regarded him with something Frederick had never seen in his eyes before: Interest. “Not in error. I am where I intended to be. Are you?”

Frederick checked the last box, scrawled his signature, and handed it back to the marshal. She pried off his carbon copies and that was that. Hannibal Lecter was now his, under his thumb, and Frederick wanted absolutely nothing to do with him.

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Jack Crawford stared at the open email on his phone. It was done, transfer complete. Prisoner is secured. No matter how many different ways he read it, the resulting reality still felt… unreal. Hannibal would die in the BSHCI, or under a federal needle if the eventual trial found him guilty without the benefit of being insane. Either option was possible, but that bridge wasn't going to get burned for quite some time. Speedy trials weren't much of a priority when the perpetrator was never going to see the light of day again regardless.

It could be years.

Jack was in no hurry. *Enjoy your four walls, doctor.*

In the meantime, the sense that the greatest battle of his life had ended in victory wasn't exactly matching reality. Big victories were supposed to be the end, not just of the battle but of an era, of the war. The world wasn't supposed to be the same after something as horrifying and engulfing as Hannibal. And yet here he stood, dress shoes sinking into the mud as he stared at yet another battle, another war, giving him the uncomfortable epiphany that Hannibal was not, in fact, the end-all-be-all of death.

There was no end to crazy.

"Same as the last five, at least from what I can tell here." Zee snapped another photo as he circled the body for the third or fourth time.

"Dollars to donuts we'll find the same parting gifts in the mouth once we get him back to the lab. And…" Jimmy jotted something on his notepad. "…we have the same heavy blood pooling under the body."

"You think he was killed here or just dismembered here?" Zee looked around the small copse of woods in which they stood, the sort of litter-strewn patch of trees that existed between apartment complexes and strip malls. Through the bare branches, they could easily make out the sign for a Panera Bread. "My money is on death elsewhere, dismemberment here."

"No, too clean. You can't hack off four limbs without leaving one hell of a mess." Jimmy popped his head up like a gopher. "Unless our guy cleaned up after himself. Could have laid plastic."

"Yes, he could have!"

"Would have been a convenient way to take the limbs when he was done too."

"Black plastic, a dark patch of woods…"

"…would explain why he bled out but there's not enough in this pool to account for it."

“He could have used plastic to pool the rest of the blood like a funnel, take it with him.”

“Why would anyone want blood?”

“Maybe for that, eh, English pudding crap. Blood pudding, right?”

“We don’t know our guy is eating anything.”

“Why take the limbs then?”

“You think everyone is cannibal.”

“Gentlemen.” Jack leveled a glare at both of them. “Why don’t we just stick to what we know at this point. Zee, you done?”

“Yeah, I’ve got all the *in situ*.”

“Then let’s wrap this up. Cut him down.” Jack took a step back and one final look at the display before them.

The victim was a white male, mid-twenties at a guess, with buzz cut dark hair and an army tattoo on his upper chest. Just as with the last five victims, his arms and legs had been severed high up with no obvious attempt to stem blood loss. *He’s not keeping them alive*. What was left of the body had been impaled on a large abattoir hook tied to a tree, as if the man was nothing more than a side of beef. Although the head hung down, chin wobbling against the chest as the techs gently lowered the body, Jack was almost certain of what they would find in the lab. The victim's mouth would be stitched shut, delicately through the thin skin behind the upper lip, the same way morticians do when preparing a body for display. Inside the mouth they would find the victim’s license, cut down to fit but retaining all pertinent information. *He wants us to know who they are*. Under the tongue, they would find a curled up clipping of a bible passage. The same passage each time:

[He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. – Exodus 34:7]

This guy wasn’t subtle. Unfortunately, his blaring messages of motive weren’t proving to be much help in catching the son of a bitch. They needed more, and Jack had a feeling that ‘more’ was going to be found in the one piece of evidence they had yet to substantiate to motive or purpose: strands of long dark blond hair, carefully wrapped around the victims’ tongues.

Lab analysis had yielded nothing more than that the hair was Caucasian, untreated, and free of apparent drug use. The length suggested a woman, but that was biased supposition at best. So far, none of the hairs had included a viable follicle, no DNA, which meant they were less than worthless for identification.

They meant something, though, something important. The sick son of a bitch wouldn’t be wrapping the same hair—they were at least sixty percent sure they were from the same

person—around the victims' tongues for no reason. Not when everything else read like a billboard of intent.

Jack had already speculated that the hair could be from the killer himself—herself?—but once again, without DNA from a follicle root it was a dead-end path.

"Any early guesses on this one?" Zee shouted over the wind as he began disassembling his camera lens. "My money's on Jacob Bronson. Same dark hair, wide jaw. Spitting image to his mug shot."

Jimmy squinted up at the sky, as he always did when giving undue consideration to Zee's nonsense. "Could be, but David Carr had the same coloring and a pretty similar bone structure in the face."

"Damn, you're right. And Ronald Gates could work too."

"Of course, without seeing the mothers first, it's all one sided guessing," Jimmy noted, "Both my parents are tall and willowy, so there's no accounting for resemblance in parentage."

"You know, that's true!" Zee bounded over a log, coming to stand next to Jimmy. "My cousin Lindsey is the biggest ginger you've ever seen, and her husband is Hispanic. Their daughter took entirely after the mom. She looks like that little Scottish girl from Brave. He's kind of sore about it when people assume she isn't his."

Jimmy shook his head. "Genetics."

"They're a bitch."

Jack gritted his teeth. Christ, he missed Beverly. "I shouldn't have to remind either of you that we're keeping a tight seal of this." Jack glanced around at the other crime scene techs, not to mention the local cops standing perimeter to keep the nosey civilians in the Panera Bread parking lot. He turned back to Zee and Jimmy. "No more names. The last thing we need is a panic on our hands."

Jimmy at least had the sense to look guilty, while Zee just pretended to have the world's most complicated camera bag.

Jack headed back to his car, his shoulders hunched and his chin tucked down into his scarf. The scene was grotesque but simple, nothing like the 'field kabuki' of Hannibal's kills. Every victim had been killed and mutilated the same way, even discarded in the same way, suggesting the killer found nothing individually unique about his victims. Hannibal had tailored his murders to fit the victim, mocking them for their roles in life or for whatever slight he felt they had made against him. Hannibal was at least interesting.

Jack rubbed a gloved hand hard across his face. What the hell was wrong with him? He was comparing other killers to Hannibal now? Calling Hannibal interesting?

'*He gets inside your head. That's what he does.'*

Once inside the car, he slammed the door harder than necessary and pulled out his phone. He still had Will on his speed dial, yet another sign that his promises to leave Will alone had always been less than sincere. People were dying, and more were going to die, so he didn't have the luxury of concerning himself with one man. Besides, there had been extenuating circumstances before. Will was no longer under the crippling influence of encephalitis and a psychopathic therapist. Will wasn't going to lose himself this time because this time was different, completely different.

He can handle it.

Until they could figure out how and why this new monster was choosing his victims, the FBI had no way to protect them, let alone set a trap. The possible victim pool was simply too wide, hundreds of people, even thousands depending on how far back this lunatic was going and whether or not that 'third and fourth generation' line was being taken literally. There had to be a reason why he was choosing the particular victims he did, a reason beyond the one thing they all had in common.

There had to be something more than the fact they were all children of known serial killers.

Jack started the car and pressed three on his speed dial. He wasn't taking no for an answer.

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"No, Jack."

Will heaved one of the last boxes into the back of his car, huffing with more exertion than he could remember. Most days, he found it difficult to remember a life before sweat-dripping pain and lungs that never seemed to fill as much as he needed. Maybe he had imagined that life. Maybe he'd been born in pain and those years *before* were the real dream.

His exhaustion now, however, was definitely his own fault. He had done next to nothing in the last two months. Without his dogs and—what else did he have?—he had spent his time sleeping, packing, and driving around aimlessly when the realtor announced she was coming over with more people to view the house.

Will Graham's murder house, the place where Hannibal the Cannibal mutilated Mason Verger, the place where he surrendered, the place everyone knew because Freddie Lounds had published his damn address. To think he had actually worried about ever being able to sell the place. The bidding war, so the realtor had told him with open glee, had been intense.

"I've got nothing on this guy, Will." Jack insisted, his shoes crunching on the old snow.

"Nothing, Jack?" Will shot him an incredulous look. "He's IDing his victims for you, he's dismembering them the same way, and the bible passage is…" Will scoffed and headed back to the porch for another box. He had known Jack would come calling eventually, that his

promises to forget Will's number had been empty at best, but to do so after barely two months? And for a killer whose motives and calling cards were so…pedestrian?

Jack followed. "Motive isn't our problem here. So we know he's after the children of serial killers, he thinks he's exacting some righteous justice. I get that, but this brush is too wide. The second victim…" He sighed with exasperation as Will picked up another box and headed back to the car. "The second victim was sixty-three, youngest daughter of Clive Morley. He killed sixteen nurses over twelve years, he was caught in 1952, Will. *1952.* The fifth victim was the only son of Lucas Reed, who was caught in the act plucking out a construction worker's eyes to add to his collection, and that was in 2004. We don't have a net wide enough to throw here."

"You won't persuade me with fishing analogies." Will used his shoulder to shove the box in before closing hatch trunk with a bang. "You're playing a connections game, built on information the killer obviously has access to, so do the research. That's not my parlor trick."

"Yes, it is. You make connections no one else can."

Will stopped, his gloved fingers gripping the seam of the trunk as a wave of sickly déjà vu washed over him. What were his lines again?

"Update your contacts list, Jack. I'm not the only profiler, or ex profiler. You have Bonham, Larson. Hell," He walked around the car and pulled open the driver's door. "why don't you ask someone who is still doing this for a living?"

"Bonham and Larson are academics, cold case scholars. I don't need them losing their lunch at every autopsy and rambling on about absentee fathers and childhood trauma. What do you expect me to do? Sign in at the Baltimore State and ask Chilton to look over the files?"

Will snapped his head around so fast it hurt. "Leave Frederick out of this."

Jack snorted. "Gladly. I was being facetious. I'm looking for help, not posturing."

For a moment Will wondered if the last time he had seen Frederick, numb and lost in that joke of a meeting before he'd fled the room, was just another thing he had dreamed up. If not, Jack had been there too and seen the same man he had, changed almost beyond recognition. Posturing was not something Frederick seemed to have much in him anymore.

Maybe it was blown out of him, along with his eye and the back of his skull.

Will closed his eyes. "The profile he wrote on the Chesapeake Ripper was accurate, Jack. Painfully so. Maybe we should remember that."

"And he fit that profile, to a T, so maybe we should remember that too before we waste more time berating ourselves."

If that detail helped Jack sleep at night, good for him. It didn't do much for Will. "I'm not discussing this anymore."

“Good. I didn’t come here to talk about Dr. Chilton. I *came here* to talk about a lunatic who is butchering people because they had the misfortune of being born with the wrong parents. If I never set foot inside that hospital again, it’ll be too soon—”

“Wait a minute,” Will interjected, his thoughts finally catching up. “Frederick is still director? He’s still there?”

Jack sighed. “Yes. He stepped back into his position almost as soon as he was released, *and* he signed the transfer order for Hannibal this morning.”

“The board didn’t push him out, replace him?”

Jack rolled his eyes, frowning hard as a topic he obviously didn’t give a damn about. “From what I understand, his contract is pretty solid with wrongful termination. If he didn’t want to resign, they had no legal cause to dismiss him. Now, can we can focus here?”

Will worked to keep the bitter amusement off his face. *Oh, Alana, what will you do now?* She had secrets to keep, and with Hannibal’s incarceration Will had no doubt those secrets would only be kept for the price of a heavily gilded cage. If there was one thing Hannibal would not tolerate, it was indignity.

What indignities will you exact on him, Frederick?

“I gave you my answer. No.” He dropped down into the driver’s seat and grabbed the door handle, his gaze daring Jack to interfere. “They have something in common beyond just their fathers’ sins. Hunt it down yourself.”

“I need my best hunter.”

Will shoved his key into the ignition and turned it. “I was never a hunter, Jack, just a fisherman.”

No Limits

“Lady, please. I already told the lawyers everything. I’m not supposed to talk about this with anyone.”

Freddie hopped back as Jason Lindsey emerged onto the slanting porch. He was dressed to leave, bundled up and carrying an ancient L.L. Bean messenger bag covered in band patches. The guy was in his early 40s and looked as if he had never left the mid-90s grunge faze behind. She’d bet good money he kept a hackeysack on his desk.

“Mr. Lindsey, I’m not here in my capacity as a journalist. I promise that nothing you reveal to me will be published.” She smiled sweetly.

He reached past her to a switch on the porch beam, flicking off the lighted *Open* sign. Lindsey ran a homeopathic veterinary clinic out of his house, which was just about the stupidest goddamn thing Freddie had ever heard of. No wonder the guy had been drummed out of real medicine. The fact that he had been dismissed from the Wiltmore fertility labs more than a decade ago was one of the prime pieces of evidence showing that Wiltmore knew what he did, and had tried to cover it up.

“Yeah, right.” Lindsey sneered, heading for his car. “That article in the East County was bad enough, but then you had to make up all that crap about that s-serial killer. I’ve had wackos calling my office, demanding to know if I’m 'breeding psychopaths'. What kind of freaks read your website?”

“With all due respect, I didn’t make up anything. I just asked questions. Dr. Lecter did work at Baltimore General at the same time they were suing Mediland International, and at the same time your lab was hired to test all those semen samples. The people have a right to know.”

“The hell they do!” He fumbled with his keys, the sad moron forgetting that this was 2015 and he had a keyfob.

“Mr. Lindsey, I swear. After my article, I was contacted by a few parents who had *in vitro* at Wiltmore around that time. They just want to know the truth, for their own sakes.” Okay, so she had been the one to contact them, and all but one had slammed the phone down. The one that didn’t had called her every name in the book before she hung up. “This has nothing to do with Hannibal Lecter. These mothers are worried about their children, family health history, threat of diabetes, that sort of thing. If you…messed up with their procedures too, then the source they thought they were getting is wrong, right?”

Lindsey hesitated, biting his lower lip like the sentimental dishrag she already knew he was. It was why the guy had done what he did in the first place. Freddie knew how to dig a hell of a lot better than the crossword hacks at the East County Times. An electrician Wiltmore had hired sixteen years ago to do some upgrades had done the work in the wrong order, shutting

down several freezers and causing samples to be lost. Rather than tell a bunch of rich, baby-hungry future mothers that the samples they had reserved were gone, Lindsey had just borrowed a bit from a few different cups, right? Or, more likely, had relabeled a bunch of other cups and fudged the paperwork to back it up.

"Eh, okay. Do you have their names? I can…" He winced, glancing around as if someone might be listening. Freddie's recorder was. "I can check my records and see if any of them were the ones I had to use different samples for."

Records. He had records and just admitted to it. What kind of hopeless dweeb kept records of his own fraud? *Merry Christmas, Freddie.* "That would be amazing, thank you so much. But, do you know just the mothers names? I mean, if you don't actually know which sample you used for which patient, it won't really help with all the health worries, you know?"

Lindsey's eyes shot wide, then narrowed. Shit. Maybe he wasn't as stupid as she thought.

"Oh, no! I'm not telling you that. You give me the mothers' names, and I'll look through the medical record copies I made and *I* will write out the man's medical history only. No names. I know how important medical history is, that's why I made sure to record which patient got which sample, but I'm not telling you."

You just told me more than enough, you blithering…

Freddie let out a dramatic sigh of relief. "Thank you, really. They will be so happy to hear that. They don't care about the names, they just want to be sure their children are healthy. And I will get that list to you soon." *When hell freezes over.*

"Okay." Lindsey sagged, finally opening his car door and tossing his ugly bag into the passenger seat. "I just want all this to be over. I don't need reporters and investigators around here, and I sure don't need wackos breaking into my office again."

What?

Freddie was definitely planning to break into his office later, but she hadn't done it yet. "What do you mean?"

"Someone broke into my office about three months ago, just after you wrote that stupid conspiracy theory article. They damn near tore the place apart and left all my files out of order. It was probably some father trying to make sure his kid was actually his, but I swear none of the patients involved were married or had known fathers lined up. It was just the single patients. I don't need a bunch of angry fathers coming to bash my head in because they think their kid isn't theirs' now."

"So, this break-in, someone read your files?" The last thing she needed was competition. This was her story.

"Yeah, must have, but I never heard anything about it after that, so I guess the guy didn't find his wife's name and decided they weren't involved. Good riddance. Took me all damn day to clean up that mess."

He was probably right. If it had been another reporter, that story would have dropped by now. Still, it rankled the hell of out Freddie knowing that some civilian had read everything she was after. Damn it, she needed those files.

The first article she'd written had been just purple supposition, questions based on circumstance about how Hannibal Lecter 'might' have a child, and 'the circumstances are compelling', that sort of thing. Her readers loved open ended questions, but even they eventually got tired of spinning their own conclusions. She had pushed the story to the back burner after Lecter's capture was announced, but now it was time to get that sauce cooking again. Facts, hard proof, nothing else would do. And if she found the result she hoped for, it just might be her ticket to landing an interview with Dr. Lecter.

Even an intelligent psychopath would want to know he had a kid, right? *Quid pro quo.*

"You have a nice drive home, then, Mr. Lindsey. Thanks for all your help."

"What? Eh, I actually live here, I just have a few house calls this evening. Thanks. You too."

Freddie waved as she ambled back to her car, pretending to be immersed in her phone. Honestly, she wouldn't trust a hamster to a guy that stupid. As soon as his car turned the corner, she headed for the back of the house.

****

"What is this?" Frederick laughed around a mouthful of almond coffee cake as Ellery shoved a large sketch pad at him. The picture facing him was either complimentary or incredibly insulting.

"That's you, rolling your eyes."

"Mmm." He looked over the dark pencil sketch of a man in a three piece suit, sitting, one elbow bent on the armrest while he appeared to twirl a pen through his fingers. His face was upturned, eyes rolling with an expression of comical exasperation. The rather full cheeks and pointed nose made the subject's identity difficult to argue.

It was hardly a masterpiece. The proportions were off, and the lack of complex texture and shading left it a bit flat, but there was real potential. This was a sketch from someone who would, in not too many years, be quite an accomplished artist. Between her chemistry work, her impressive progress in Spanish, and now this, Frederick felt an unaccountable surge of pride.

Of course, he didn't say any of that.

"And what, pray tell, were we discussing when I had to make such a face? I assume it was warranted."

"You make that face all the time. There it is again."

Frederick tried to force a scowl, but it went nowhere. Yes, he tended to roll his eyes a lot, sometimes without even noticing. It had made him particularly unpopular in medical school.

"If only I had your gift for placidity," he quipped, knowing it would win him a pleased smirk. It did. "Was this something you did for your art class, thus sealing my humiliation?"

Ellery took another square of coffee cake and returned to her seat. "We were supposed to draw a 'spontaneous reaction' focusing on facial features."

"Did you get an A?"

"I always get an A."

Frederick huffed a laugh, seeing the glint in her eyes and the fine shadows that revealed she was holding back a smile. Exaggerated arrogance was just another part of Ellery's sense of humor, like an ironic reversal of self-deprecation. He worried, however, that others might not see the joke.

Frederick brushed the cake crumbs from his hands and pulled his folio back onto his lap. "Alright, now that we've seen what a comical image I make, and you've finished fattened me up with cake, we can get back to our discussion."

"Speaking of fattening, we're analyzing Grimm's fairytales in one of my classes. That witch was going about things all wrong with Hansel and Gretel."

Frederick groaned. "The cannibalism jokes, Ellery…"

She held up her hands in surrender. "Okay. Sorry." Her grin wasn't sorry. "What were we talking about?"

"The high school that some of your foster-siblings attend." Frederick ignored the look she gave at the word siblings. "You mentioned a trip they're taking in a few weeks to New York."

"Simon and Keisha are in the madrigals club at Howard High. Every year the club takes the train to New York and they see a show and have dinner. They've been doing school fundraisers for it all year."

Was that why she had asked him about minors boarding the train alone? The other teenagers she shared a foster home with existed in a world she was no longer a part of, and they were going off to New York to see the sights. Perhaps she had had the idea of doing the same on her own.

Frederick knew to tread lightly. The one thing guaranteed to bring up Ellery's placid walls was to suggest she missed the trappings of childhood, especially other children. He had made the mistake of asking her once if she felt isolated or lonely after her accelerated graduation from high school. The rest of that session had been like talking to a block of ice.

"Do you get along with Simon and Keisha?"

"They're fine," She replied. "Better than the other two."

Five foster kids, all teenagers, in the same house. Frederick worked to keep the disapproval from his face. Not only because it would be inappropriate to express his opinion for her living situation, but also because no one liked impotent self-righteousness. It wasn't as if he could *do* anything about it, so why rant?

"Do you know what show they're planning to see?"

"The Nutcracker. They're going the weeks before Christmas." She laced her fingers over a knee, adding a few more bricks to that wall. "Keisha asked me to get her some books on ballet from the university library."

And you want to go with them. "It should be fun. I'm more partial to opera than ballet, but Tchaikovsky is always the exception. Even people who don't like ballet enjoy The Nutcracker."

She nodded, saying nothing. She either wanted to change the subject, or was holding something back. Eventually she said, "Their music teacher, Mr. Avery, told Keisha I could go along if I wanted to. I think she must have asked him about it."

Frederick smiled, unable to help it. "You should. It would be good for you."

She pursed her lips. "Good for me?"

Good for you to spend some time with other kids. Good for you to have fun. Good for you to do something for a few hours that doesn't revolve around early-onset adulthood.

He shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned, everyone would do well to take in some theater."

Her expression relaxed, almost smiling, but not quite. She looked at the clock, which she rarely did. "It's too late. They've been planning for it all year."

"That's unfortunate." He meant it.

Ellery looked at the table between them, usually indicating she was giving something he'd said serious thought, or she was about to change the subject. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"How do you feel?"

Frederick hummed a laugh, pressing a hand to his chest. "The reversal of our roles notwithstanding, I have learned my lesson about asking you that trite question."

But Ellery was no longer smiling. "I saw in the news they caught that murderer, the one who tried to frame you. They put him in your hospital."

A sick feeling stirred in his stomach, as if he had swallowed a handful of lead balls. Hannibal Lecter didn't exist in that room, with his patient. As far as Frederick was concerned,

Hannibal didn’t exist anywhere but inside the four walls of his cell. In fact, he didn’t even think about Hannibal anymore.

Keep telling yourself that, liar.

He could still feel the cling of sweat on his brow from just that morning as he’d woken on a fevered cry, the scent of blood in his nose and the dull crinkle of clear plastic in his ears.

He must have remained silent for too long.

“Why would they do that?” Ellery continued, watching him carefully. “Or did you ask them to?”

Frederick raised his chin and produced an empty smile. Of course he hadn’t asked, but for the first time he wondered if he would have. If Hannibal’s transfer hadn’t been dropped on him, would he have made moves to secure the transfer anyway? The thought of Hannibal being somewhere else, under the lock and key of others who didn’t and couldn’t understand what he was, left him feeling cold to his core.

When you have a snake by the back of the head, you can’t let go.

"People like Han—like him can't be in federal prison like normal killers." Frederick cringed, hearing the phrase 'normal killers' spill from his lips like something an editor would strike. "And there are few facilities where such people can be safely held."

Ellery nodded, though the etch between her brows belied any satisfaction with his answer. Her next words were spoken clearly, evenly, and yet had the aura of a whisper. "Do you hate him?"

"Yes." The honest answer fell out of him, like something mindlessly dropped in the worst possible place, but he made no effort to pick it up. The truth, once spilled, couldn't be gathered back up into a neat pile. He hated Hannibal Lecter. The only other person in his life who had come close to eliciting such a visceral reaction had been Abel Gideon, and by comparison those feelings were now so tame and stunted as to barely warrant the word. Whatever hatred he might have or could have felt for Gideon was driven out of Frederick the moment he’d seen him on that table, slaughtered to something that better resembled a broken action figure than a man. Gideon had paid, above and beyond, and Frederick knew a thing or two about overpaying for one’s trespasses.

His reasons for hating Hannibal were not, perhaps, as obvious as others might think. Oh, certainly he hated Hannibal for framing him, for setting into motion the events that had caused him so much physical anguish that the pain had become a part of his memory, recalled with wincing realism in a way that neurologists had long held was impossible. It was more than that. He hated Hannibal for making him a part of his manipulations, a cog in the machinery he had used to jail Will Graham and protect himself, with Frederick as the witlessly enthusiastic jailer. He hated him for butchering Beverly Katz, the only member of Crawford's cadre of agents who had treated Frederick with some modicum of respect, or at least a lack of instant dislike.

And he hated him for what he had done to Will Graham, what he had turned him into. Frederick's botched first impression, on the day Graham and Crawford had come to investigate his suspicions about Gideon, had contained as many truths as unfortunate faux pas. Graham was an incomparable, utterly unique not just in his 'cocktail of personality disorders', but also in his perceptions and near alien ability to recognize patterns. Graham could bring into himself what the rest of them could only watch from the outside. Frederick had been...in awe, and had made a top-shelf ass of himself trying to hide it.

Hannibal had taken that exceptional piece of humanity and twisted it into something ugly… something that would run off to Italy after him with the very flimsy, and questionable, excuse of bringing him to justice.

Frederick never believed that, and he suspected Crawford didn't either.

"I hate the man who killed my mom."

Frederick snapped his head up, only then realizing he had dropped his eyes to the floor. He cleared his throat, professional mask back in place. "You've never mentioned the accident."

"They said it wasn't his fault. The driver. He claimed he was on medication that wasn't supposed to be prescribed together. He blamed his doctor, but...I saw him once, at the arraignment. I had to yell and demand for the social worker to even let me be there. He pled guilty to some charge that let him stay out of jail, and when the judge said he was free to go he..." Ellery tilted her head, the etch between her eyes joined by new wrinkles. Though she continued to look at him, Frederick feared she was no longer seeing him at all.

"He wasn't wearing a suit. I remember that. He was dressed the way rich men are when they play golf, like I'd seen on TV, all beige and white, a polo shirt. Even his shoes were white. He saw me, and I know he knew who I was. He knew my mom was dead and he didn't even look sorry. He didn't look indifferent either, which I think I could have understood. He was *annoyed*."

Ellery's eyes, which had yet to leave him, suddenly shot back into focus, boring into him as if demanding he understand what she was saying. "The look on his face when he saw me was so irritated, like all he could think was 'how dare they let this brat be here to make me feel bad.' He didn't even bother to pretend, which was somehow worse than everything. My mom was gone, they told me I had to leave my house, the bank was taking it, and I could only take a few suitcases of stuff, but still I didn't hate him until he wouldn't even *act* sorry. People are supposed to at least pretend. He didn't even dress like that day meant anything to him. It was so...*rude*."

Ellery's voice never cracked, but her eyes now swam behind a glaze of tears that every law of gravity said should have fallen. The laws of Ellery kept them firmly in place.

Frederick drew a breath and coughed when it came in wet and clogged. Traitorous pressure built behind his eyes and, and for first time he could remember he felt the urge to leave his chair and comfort a patient in his arms. It wasn't fair. Most days it felt like the universe had been tailor made to fit the monsters, be they psychopathic killers or self-absorbed assholes driving Land Rovers.

He set his folio aside and scooted forward until his knees touched the coffee table. “Ellery?”

She lifted her face, still fighting gravity.

“It’s alright to hate him.”

“I know.”

“Even if he’d worn a nice suit and looked miserable, it would still be alright.”

She smirked, or tried to anyway. “No brownie points for acting?”

“No. Trust me.” Frederick swallowed hard as the thoughts bouncing around his head kept banging into that thin wall of doctor-patient separation. Ellery was alone in the world, or felt that she was, and the last thing she needed was an accredited zoo keeper giving her advice from behind the glass. She needed what Frederick never got in that damn hospital: commiseration, equity.

Frederick placed a hand on the table. “Hannibal Lecter was an amazing actor. He had everyone fooled, including me. If he had been in that courtroom, he would have been dressed like it was the most important moment of his life, and he would have delivered just enough banked misery to make everyone in that room believe he was holding back tears. By the time he was done, the prosecutor would have been apologizing for bringing him there. Trust me, Ellery, when I say that is far worse. You get to hate the man who killed your mom. He was stupid enough or careless enough to let you see what he was right away. You get to hate him without the insult of being fooled first.”

Ellery nodded several times, a motion uncommon for her, and Frederick suspected she no longer trusted the firmness of her voice. She had shown far more than she meant to and the shifting of her eyes practically screamed for escape.

He knew the feeling.

Frederick looked at his phone, face up on the table, and pretended to be surprised. “We’re ten minutes past.”

She stood and gathered her things with her usual slow self-possession. “I have lab techniques tonight. Whoever shows up last gets the station with the broken faucet.”

“We can’t have that. I’ll see you next week.” He scooped crumbs to the edge of his table and onto a napkin, wrapping up the paper remains of the coffee cake. It was a good way to hide his face, which was probably still flushed. Once they took hold, Frederick had never been much good at keeping emotions off his face.

“Next week. And…” Ellery hesitated. “Thank you.”

Frederick forced a laugh, a softening mechanism. “No need. It’s…” He almost said *it’s my job*, but thankfully kept it back. He wasn’t getting paid to treat Ellery. Considering he didn’t give a damn about Dr. Morse’s good opinion, he couldn’t even claim it was a favor anymore.

"No, I mean thank you for the umbrella and the money. Francesco Maglia. You have good taste, Doc."

Before he could say a word she was gone, the door almost closing on a flurry of knitted scarf. Frederick let out a huff, either from amusement or irritation he wasn't sure. Probably both. Though, he did note, with definitely more amusement than irritation, that she had made no offer to return his tasteful umbrella.

Frederick dropped the balled up bakery papers into a trashcan, shaking his head. With a smile, he pulled out his phone and looked up the contact information for the Howard High-School music department.

****

No one was laughing now.

The hardened agents and the even harder CSU techs were deathly quiet. Zee made no attempt to speculate on the victim's parentage, and Jimmy kept his inexhaustible reservoir of factoids to himself. Jack realized, in a kind of rage enforced haze, that their progress with a crime scene was just as efficient and quick without the screwing around as it was with. Beverly had been right all those years; they could screw around and still do their jobs in the same amount of time.

But no one was screwing around now.

The body—*My God*—had been prepared and presented just as all the others. Naked, limbs severed high and gone, impaled on a single abattoir hook tied to a tree. They would find almost the same contents in the closed mouth; *almost*, because the cut-down driver's license wouldn't be there. What would they find instead? A library card? A school ID? One of those fake birth certificates that came with American Girl dolls?

Jack cupped a gloved hand over his face, willing himself to keep his shit together. A choked sound, following by quick steps caught his attention. He looked up just in time to see one of the younger techs stumble away into the bushes to vomit and sob.

Zee lowered his camera and gave Jack a single nod. He was done. Jack signaled with a gesture and they began lowered what was left of the body. It was so light, one tech accomplished the task alone, lowering the chi—the body onto the open bag with unfocused eyes. They zipped the bag closed, the sound cutting through the silence like a bullhorn.

Four days. The son of a bitch had only waited four days. This wasn't typical escalation, and it wasn't a spree. This was a list getting checked off.

Jack lifted his phone, the speed dial already going through. "Will? Don't hang up."

Birds

Chapter Summary

In which cages are gilded and perches defended.

I strike Melanie Prylor at the base of her skull, killing her instantly. The others were only knocked unconscious, but it does not matter. The manner of their death does not concern me. I amputate both arms just above the bicipital groove, using no finesse or skill. None is required. None is deserved.

I remove the legs in a similar fashion, severing them inches below the lesser trochanter. Melanie Prylor will never know the loss of her limbs, she will never know the suffering and humiliation of becoming less. In this, I am better than her. Better than all of them.

I place the remains on a butcher's hook, but none will ever consume this flesh. It is tainted. I have removed a poison from the world before it had a chance to spread. There will be no third and fourth generation of the Prylor monster. The FBI will come soon, they will see, but they will not know until it is too late.

They will not know to be grateful, will not accept that I have done their future work for them.

This is my design.

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"I know there's not much here."

Will gave a start, Jack's booming voice jerking him into the present. The crime scene photos shook in his hands, more from the whipping wind than his nerves. Will looked up at the tree where the most recent body—the little girl who had been just weeks from her twelfth birthday— had hung. CSU had taken the hook and rope, but the marred bark of the tree showed where they had been.

"No, there isn't." Will agreed. A patch of woods next to a generic apartment complex, the edges littered with microwaves, old ACs, and the other heavy civilized refuse the weekly garbage man refused to take. Why here? Why these types of places, so close to the glaring lights of parking lots and popular stores?

Why only Baltimore?

“He wants us to find them quickly,” Jack declared, as if he hearing his thoughts. “So far we’ve found every victim in the same order which they were killed. He’s taunting us.”

“He’s taunting someone,” Will muttered, “Not sure if it’s us.”

“If not us, who?” Jack glared at the pink snow beneath the offending tree. The techs had tossed fresh snow over the blood as they left, but it had seeped through already. There had been no new snowfall since.

“The guilty.” Will jumbled the photos back together and closed the folder over them. He had seen almost everything over the years, either in reality or in the corners of his overly accurate imagination, but this…

He had seen the corpses of children before. Working homicide, so routinely linked to domestic violence as it was, had made that inevitable. But he had never seen them mutilated, never displayed. The vicious men he had hunted down more times than he could count had always reserved that treatment for the women in their lives.

Will shuddered against the wind. He liked to pretend the killers he had faced in his two careers operated with some personal boundaries in play, even if just the arbitrary limits of their own creation—*Standards, Hannibal might say—* but perhaps he had always been fooling himself. How could you know a killer’s boundaries until you watched him pass a few? There had once been a time when Will thought he knew his own boundaries, had believed firmly in them with no need to spy the cliff’s edge. Hannibal had disagreed.

A part of him still believed Hannibal had his own boundaries, but Abigail might disagree.

Will continued, “If he was taunting us, the victims would be related to law enforcement, or maybe survivors from past cases.”

“So he’s taunting their fathers?” Jack shook his head. “The only one of them that’s even still alive is Lucas Reed, and he’s a diagnosed schizophrenic who’s so far gone he thinks Ross Perot is president. The most recent one, the…the girl’s father, Marcus Prylor, was at the HCI until two years ago. He was killed by a guard when he tried to escape the medical ward. This guy can’t be doing all this as a middle finger to Lucas Reed.”

Not even close. “If Reed was the target of the taunting, his son would have been kept for last.” Will sucked in a breath, holding it as a new thought ate up the oxygen. “He’s working up to something, or someone. Whoever he’s planning to kill last, that’s what this is all about. That victim’s father.”

A bitter smile spread Jack’s lips, the sort of expression that was both satisfied and disgusted. “A personal grudge, then? So much for biblical righteousness.”

“In the end, every vigilante is just working his own corner.”

“That a quote from your days in homicide?”

“It works for VICE too.”

Jack gave a snort, but the amusement didn't last. It couldn't, with the pink snow still watching them. "If our guy is trying to taunt someone, how does he think he's doing that? We've managed to keep this out of the news. Even Tattle Crime hasn't gotten wind yet."

"I doubt that will last long now." Will hated to say it, and wouldn't, but Jack was a smart guy. It took only a few seconds.

"Son of a bitch!" Jack spun away, his anger echoing off the trees. "That's why he took Melanie Prylor, to make sure the media would find out."

"There was an Amber alert when she went missing—"

"God *damnit*."

"And he left her yellow sweater in the bushes, to make sure the local cops would see it and know it was her." Will pinched the bridge of his nose, a mere echo of his old headaches starting behind his eyes. He should be worried; not that he felt bad, but that he didn't feel much worse.

He should be worried by how easy it was to slip back in to the job.

"He's been giving us their identities, making their bodies easy to find." Jack looked like he was grinding stones between his teeth. "Because he wants it to get out. He wants his...what? Taunting target to know what's coming to his kid?"

Yes. Will felt the truth of it in his bones, as he always did when the killer's motivation entered him like an electric shock. But he never got the full story in that initial jolt, and he wasn't getting it now. *Why these in particular?*

"What if there is no logic behind how he's choosing them?" Jack rounded back, his anger already pushing him into his usual predictable fatalism. "Other than being the children of serial killers, what if there's nothing else beyond that?"

Drawing such a conclusion was understandable, angry fatalism aside. The victims were scattered across the age brackets, both sexes, and the crimes committed by their fathers weren't similar enough in method or motivation for that to be the deciding factor. Regardless, it wasn't random. Each victim was another hint at the last, another declaration.

"If that was the only factor, he'd be taking them based on easy opportunity, or geographical convenience. They all have something else in common."

"*Who* has something else in common? The victims, or their fathers?"

Will could feel the answer lodged under his ribs, like a breath that just wouldn't pull deep enough. "I don't know." He ran his tongue over the sharp tops of his teeth, wondering how much more difficult the motion would be if his tongue was wrapped in sharp strands of hair.

The hair.

It was the only common factor between every crime scene. The bodies had been mutilated the same way, displayed in the same way, yes, but the only thing that had been, that could be, absolutely identical was that dark blond hair. Even the bible passages had been ripped from different printings; different paper types, different fonts.

"I need to see everything you have on all the victims' fathers. Every police report, psyche evaluation, confession footage. All of it."

Jack did a poor job of hiding his satisfied smiled. He had his fisherman on the pier once more. Will turned back to the strip of woods, too far away now to see the pink snow but imagining he could. Jack believed he was there because the latest victim had been a child, and he wasn't entirely wrong. It was what had convinced Will not to hang up the phone, to turn his car around when he did and give up the long drive to Louisiana. What Jack didn't know was that Will had already made the decision to turn around the next time he filled up his tank.

This was who he was.

This was what he did.

This made him feel alive.

"There's one thing we can be sure of, though," Jack said as he opened the car door.

I know. "What's that?"

"Whoever he's taunting is here, in Baltimore. Why else go through the trouble of bringing the bodies here?"

Will fell into the passenger seat. "I know."

****

Frederick gritted his teeth, false molars and all, as Dr. Kendrick launched into yet another bloviated explanation for why he was interfering in the running of his hospital. *Frederick's* hospital.

"The board has decided that a more hands-on approach would be good for general policy. Surely you have to agree that nine heads are better than one, Dr. Chilton."

No, he did not agree, and Frederick doubted Kendrick agreed either. Board member or not, he was an idle pedant who hadn't given a damn about real medicine in three decades. It was an open secret that his family had practically purchased his medical license once upon a time, in the Stone Age when such things were still possible. He collected his dividends, profited from the government payments on their dangerous inmates, and liked to hear others address him as

doctor at cocktail parties. Such was, and always had been, the extent of Kendrick's interest in psychiatric medicine.

So why was he now holding a copy of the patient assessment schedule, covered in glaring red notes and changes?

"I've noticed that you, once again, have not scheduled an assessment of Dr. Lecter." Kendrick tutted, wagging the paper. "Surely you know hospital policy dictates at least one supervising assessment, *by the director,* every year for every patient."

"He hasn't been here even a month—"

"Yes, yes, but you've been burning the candle at both ends since you returned to us." Kendrick chuckled, the sound like wind rattling a tin can. "You've already completed almost three quarters of your other yearly assessments. Why the delay in seeing to Dr. Lecter?"

Frederick could feel that tell-tale numbness coming over him, like a fainting spell that never reached unconsciousness. "I would think that considering my history with Dr. Lecter, the board would find it inappropriate—"

"If you were *treating* him, certainly, but there are no exceptions in the hospital policy, I'm afraid. I see here that you have no assessments scheduled for Friday. You can look over Dr. Lecter then. An hour or two, and done. But before you do, look over the revised assessment guidelines. Your assistant should have them by this afternoon."

Frederick made sure to keep his expression blank. So blank, in fact, that Kendrick's false smile soon dropped.

"Is that a problem, Dr. Chilton?"

There was absolutely a problem, and Frederick was sure he knew exactly what it was. And who was causing it. "No, not at all."

"Good. Dr. Lecter is a patient of this hospital and you are supposed to be a professional. You can't avoid him forever."

Jódete, Doctor.

Kendrick shuffled off, leaving Frederick alone on the stair landing. The past two weeks had been an occupational hell. The board had decided, seemingly overnight, that every decision he had made in the past seven years was up for review. They couched their new intrusions with talk of progressive new methods and 'hands on' administration. They had questioned his scheduling, his methods for approving interview requests, even the damn patient menus. His paperwork had nearly doubled. What was next? An hour long meeting on the type of toilette paper in the cells?

Frederick's one overriding certainly was that none of them really cared. They hadn't from the moment he took the job and there was no reason for them to start. They weren't trying to

review his decisions or revise hospital policies; they were trying to drive him out. And the name he had seen just that morning on the secure ward visitor log gave him a good idea why.

He reached the front room of his office, frowning when he saw his assistant's chair empty and the door to his office cracked open. He pushed inside, expecting to find his assistant. Instead, he found a head of pitch black hair, artfully styled into a bouffant side-sweep. The owner sat half reclined behind his desk, thumbing through one his antique phrenology texts.

"Get out of my chair, Alana."

She tilted her head back, giving him a sidelong smirk before she rose gracefully to her feet. It was not the first time Frederick had seen her since her window shattering fall from Hannibal's good graces. In the month since Hannibal's arrival, she had visited every week. In that time, he had seen her coming or going, signing the security log or arriving at the front steps from the back of a chauffeured Rolls Royce Phantom. Neither of them had seen fit to exchange words. There was nothing to say.

"Have you clapped your hands together in a prayer of gratitude?" Alana circled his desk, skimming her manicured fingers along the edge. "'Thank you, Father, for allowing me to hold this monster away from your flock. Thank you, on behalf of all the souls I will spare of pain. Thank you for entrusting in me the keys to the beast's cage?'"

Frederick took his seat and pulled a stack of files toward him as if he meant to see to their business. "No 'we' to include yourself in the invocation?"

She gave a rueful smile. "It is your cabal, one and only. Hannibal will spend the rest of his life watching the diaper carts roll by."

"Will he? The federal death penalty is guaranteed." Frederick took in the image of the woman before him, his titular colleague and one whom, he could now admit, he had once envied in more ways than one. He hardly recognized her.

"Unless he beats it on an insanity defense."

Frederick narrowed his eyes. "Hannibal is not insane."

Alana stopped at the leather sofa dominating the center of the room and tapped her fingers on one of the buttons. "I'm surprised at you, Frederick. Living serial killers are always a much larger draw on the popular imagination. You and Freddie had better publish quickly, before they stick the needle in."

Frederick almost laughed, but he no longer appreciated the sound of faux bitter humor. So that was what she still thought of him? In truth, he couldn't even be angry. That *had* been him, once upon a time. Publish or perish, fame or famine; to think it had taken a bullet through the head to make him appreciate obscurity.

"I told Ms. Lounds she could find her writing partners elsewhere. I'm not interested."

Alana circled the arm of the sofa and sat. A brief tightening around her mouth gave away her pain. She had given up using the cane, probably too soon, and Frederick wondered if it wasn't some absurd power move.

Pot meets kettle. He finally spared a laugh at himself.

"Is that what you plan to say at the trial?" Alana pinched the crease in her trousers, smoothing it up to her knee. She wasn't looking at him. In fact, she had avoided anything but the most fleeting glances since he had entered the room. For a brief moment, Frederick entertained the thought that she might be feeling guilty for the role she had played in setting Jack Crawford's sights firmly on him, but the moment passed.

'Where there is life, there is wishful thinking.'

"I doubt the court will be interested in my publishing prospects."

"Cute. The insanity defense, Frederick. Are you going to argue against it?"

"No."

"No?"

"I don't plan to give any professional opinion one way or the other." Frederick pulled a folder toward him, hesitated, then shoved it aside. Who was he kidding? "Concerned I'll rain on your parade, Alana?"

"You think I want him to avoid the death penalty?" The question should have been rhetorical, or outraged, but her tone was surprisingly genuine. As if she really didn't know what he thought.

Frederick leaned back in his chair under a wave of fresh exhaustion. He was so damn tired, and it was time to cut the shit. "I think you want much more than that. You lied. You signed your name to a whole police report of lies."

Alana rose to her feet, this time not bothering to cover her wince of pain. "It may not be difficult to see lies floating about my head, but it's almost impossible to shoot them down."

"Hannibal will shoot them down."

Alana's eyes widened and her cheeks, already ghostly white, seemed to go paler still. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, Hannibal wants something, or several somethings. It's amazing how things turned out at Muskrat Farm. Eleven dead, including Mason Verger, and yet you and the lucky Ms. Verger managed to avoid the wrath. How *did* you manage it?"

After Hannibal's capture, Frederick had spent a good few days kicking himself for his cowardly isolation from the news. Refusing to follow any details about the international manhunt had been one thing, but afterwards he had made a point of going back and reading

whatever he could find. The events surrounding his return to the US, and eventual capture—*surrender*—had been particularly interesting, and questionable.

A part of him felt sorry for Alana, and an even bigger part was happy to applaud her ingenuity. Mason Verger had been a sadistic waste of a human being whom no one would miss, but Alana's schemes now included shoving him from his perch, and he would be damned if that was going to happen.

"Are you accusing me of something, Frederick?"

Bitterness, concentrated over months of numbness, seemed to flow through his veins like a fresh injection. He stood and braced both hands on the desk. "'Not like you to hide an achievement.'"

He saw the moment his words, her words, struck their mark. Alana drew a sharp breath through flared nostrils, her posture ridged as if preparing for a fight. She was wasting her time.

"No need to ruffle your feathers, Doctor Bloom. You want him? By all means, do me the favor."

She blinked. "What?"

"I may not be as smart as I once thought, but I'm not half as stupid as you think either. Dr. Kendrick suddenly cares about my patient assessment schedule, when he's never given a damn about anything but his houseboat and Rolex collection? Dr. Morris, who has been fighting his divorce for two years to avoid alimony payments, is suddenly happily and vocally free of his wife? And Dr. Louister…" He let out a disgusted sound. "If you're going to bribe the hospital board to make my life a living hell so I'll voluntarily resign, you could at least pay off the members who aren't vulgar class climbers with a known gambling addiction. He took his kids out of private school last year when he could no longer pay the tuition, but he parked a brand new Porche Nine-Eleven in his spot Monday morning. Impressive."

"If you think you can prove anything, you're wrong."

"I don't give a damn if Hannibal killed Mason Verger for you, or if you did it and he's taking the blame for perks. The only thing I'm trying to prove is that you've wasted your time and your new money. If you wanted to be Hannibal's keeper, all you had to do was ask." A deep part of him, and a rather old part, enjoyed the stunned look on her face. She had come expecting a Machiavellian struggle, not a grateful surrender. In truth, he couldn't blame her. He had greedily coveted his dominion over Will Graham during his short stay, and there was little reason for Alana to think he wouldn't have seen Hannibal the same way.

The difference being, of course, that the thought of seeing Hannibal or hearing his voice still made him guts twist. He still woke in a cold sweat more often than not. Kenrick, the pompous bastard, had been right about one thing. He was avoiding Hannibal, desperately.

Alana came to the desk and matched his posture, both hands braced and leaning toward him. "You'll resign?"

“Not a chance, and unnecessary. You want to build our bird a gilded cage, you want to hold the keys? Fine. Give him floor to ceiling space for a thousand books. Feed him foie gras and Kobe beef five times a week and tuck him in with Pima cotton sheets. *I don't care.*”

“What's the catch?”

“The catch is that you join the staff.” Frederick felt a heady rush, like a drowning man about the breach the water's surface. “Assistant director, deputy director, call yourself whatever you want. But Hannibal will be your sole purview; his therapy, his keep, his correspondence, everything. I don't want to hear about him or know about him. Anything entering or leaving this hospital that involves him will have your signature on it, not mine.”

Alana looked at him as if he had grown another head. The cogs were turning behind her blue eyes, trying to make sense of what he had just said and what she had always known of him. They no longer meshed. She pressed her lips together, smoothing her lipstick. “And?”

“*And* there is one security measure I demand and you will agree to right now, or we're done talking.”

“I'm listening.”

“He never leaves his cell. Never. If there's a medical emergency, the staff and the equipment go in, he does *not* come out. I don't care if a pipe bursts or the building is on fire, no exceptions.”

She nodded, but the look of disbelief remained. She leaned back, taking her hands away from the desk. “You're really agreeing to this.”

“Rather anti-climactic, isn't it? I'm sure Louister will gamble away his new Porche in a month or two.”

“I have full leeway?”

Frederick rolled his eyes. “Don't bother running your architectural plans by me. You don't want him escaping any more than I do. I recommend the old visitor reading room on the second floor. It's suitably gaudy for his tastes.”

She took another thoughtful stroll to the center of the room. When she turned back to look at him, Frederick felt like one of those pointillist paintings, as if she had stepped back to get the better perspective on him. He was dressed only slightly better than he had been lately, and he had decided to shave that morning. At least he had finally taken his suits to the cleaners yesterday.

“You've changed, Frederick. But that is what he does. Hannibal is an agent of change.”

“Clearly.” Frederick made a show of looking her over, from the sharp points of her pin striped lapels to the even sharper tips of her blood red shoes. “Nice suit.”

Alana didn't smile on her way out.

Kinks

Chapter Notes

> I have no idea how the mental health system works with regards to the criminally insane or how they are treated legally, so I made up like 75% of this. No worries. We all love Hannibal, but it wasn't a show known for its accuracy. ;P
>
> Also, there are a quite a few different Spanish translations of O Holy Night, so I just picked one. I hope it's accurate, because I speak very little Spanish. If you speak Spanish and wish to comment corrections, please do! =)

Freddie knew better than most that life wasn't easy. If the average person had lived through half the bullshit she had, the world would be a much more practical place. She had fought, fucked, and photographed her way out of the cut and paste columns and on to something better, and any of the good ol' boys who complained about it were just pissed they didn't make the cut. Besides, it wasn't always bad. Agent Zeller had been a treat and a half, so no complaints there. Still, just when Freddie was sure she had dealt with it all, that nothing and no one was going to hold her back, she had to deal with this shit.

Reluctance. Hesitation. Fucking *qualms.*

She took a few more quick snaps with the telephoto lens, appreciating the angle of the sun as it hit the subject's profile just right. You could see everything, in twenty-two megapixel perfection; the high cheekbones, the well-defined lips, the spot-on eye color. Fuck, even the hair color was identical to his old hospital ID tag, before the graying had started. Who needed a DNA test for proof? That kid had Lecter written all over her damn face.

Freddie lowered her camera and stared down at the display. There was a banner in the background, something announcing a campus event with JOHN HOPKINS printed big and prominent. She wouldn't use that one, not that it mattered. The university reveled in their little pre-adult protégés. The kid's picture, mostly candid shots from her chemistry labs, was already plastered all over the university website.

Fuck.

After she had read the file in Lindsey's office, and taken it with her just to be safe, tracking the kid down through public records had been easy. All it had taken was the mother's name, a bit of calculation on the likely month of the birth, and that was it: A healthy baby girl, seven

pounds and three ounces, born to Cynthia E. Caven, father unknown. Freddie had planned to reveal the parentage to the mother herself and record the predictable outrage and shock, blah-blah, but guess what? No mother, no home, no family. Jesus Christ, it was like some invisible hand of pity was *trying* to jack up her story.

Freddie Lounds didn't do pity. Except when she did.

Fuck me sideways.

There was a way out, though. In Freddie's experience, the best cure for pity—for most inconvenient sentiments, in fact—was to get up close and personal with the subject. People, with precious few exceptions, were unlikeable bastards. Maybe the kid was a jerk. Maybe she was an arrogant little shit who thought she was better by half due to that high IQ and penchant for grade skipping. Freddie shoved her camera in her bag, ever hopeful, and headed for the library entrance.

It was late afternoon, middle of the week, and the library was packed with beleaguered looking students, most dressed as if they had rolled out of bed with textbook spines imbedded in their cheeks. Freddie lingered by a pamphlet rack as the kid dropped her heavy bag and coat at a table before heading off into the narrow maze of the periodicals section. Freddie was a journalist, a good portion of her life was research; the cover would have to do.

Ellery—*Kind of a weird name, but whatever*—knelt about midway down the aisle as she thumbed through a box of periodicals on the bottom shelf. Freddie shuffled in sideways, her finger out and skimming the tags on the boxes. She was a chemistry major, according to the university website. Chemistry would be a perfect stepping stone to medical school, which was one of the top professions for psychopaths. Maybe Freddie didn't have to look any further than Ellery herself to lose that inconvenient sting of pity. The only problem, of course, was that Freddie considered genetic determination to be a crock of shit. Nope, she needed more.

Freddie knocked a half empty box from the shelf, causing Ellery to snap her head up.

"Oh! Sorry about that." Freddie knelt down and began gathering up the issues of—*Anthropology Now?* She didn't miss college.

The kid gave a perfunctory smile. "No problem." She took the journal she must have been looking for and turned away. Just as Freddie was wracking her brain on how to extend the interaction, Ellery stopped and turned back.

"You're…do I know you?"

Shit, Freddie hadn't planned on that. "I don't think so, though I have done research here before."

Ellery examined her with open interest, surprisingly free of the shifting eyes or forced nonchalance one expected from teenagers dealing with unknown adults. Those dark eyes reminded Freddie too much of her first meeting with Dr. Lecter. *'Are you Freddie Lounds? This is unethical, even for a tabloid journalist.'*

But then Ellery's probing expression broke into one of pleased recognition. "You're Freddie Lounds. I read most of your articles on the Chesapeake Ripper last year."

"You did?" Freddie swore she could hear the *Twilight Zone* theme playing somewhere.

"Well, I didn't really follow the story until after they arrested Dr. Chilton."

Freddie forgot her objective for a moment and rolled her eyes. Chilton, that pain in her narrow ass. As if bailing on her book wasn't bad enough, the miserable prick had already rejected her application to interview Lecter.

"You said right from the start they had the wrong man. You should have published a big gloating 'I told you so.'" Ellery gave a derisive huff. "Maybe you should work for the FBI. They obviously need the help."

Well, shit. So much for hating the kid. "Thank you. Pretty damn obvious, if you ask me."

"Exactly. Did you know the library has some of your articles filed under the 'social deviancy' header in the catalogue? You'll start getting citations soon." Ellery smiled, obviously seeing this as a compliment, and raised her periodical in a silent farewell. Unable to extend the meeting further, and unsure what to say anyway, Freddie waved her off and resumed her pretend search of the shelves.

Well, wasn't that just fucking great? Honest compliments and a smile. Fuck! What was she supposed to do now? If she published the story, the world would come falling down on a fifteen year old kid's head. Every paper in Baltimore, not to mention the pumped out blog shit on social media, would have her name synonymous with Lecter's within a few days, and that was just the media response. What about the real world? Freddie wrote for the anonymous internet hoards, so she knew a thing or two about reactionary wackos. She might as well paint a bull's-eye on the girl's back and fire the gun herself. Or…

Who was to say she had to publish Ellery Caven's name? It wasn't as if Freddie hadn't held back pertinent information in a story before, sometimes to protect her sources or to wet the readers' appetites for a follow-up. She *could* publish the story without names, and leave out enough information to make tracking Ellery down almost impossible. After all, her readers loved to speculate, and there wasn't much room for that when you gave them everything and left their imaginations nowhere to go. She knew who Lecter's kid was. She had all the official documentation she needed to back it up, so if push really came to shove she could prove her story after the fact.

Yes, that would work, and if anyone wanted to accuse her of making shit up they could kiss her ass. Hell, she'd even drop Lindsey's name if she had to. No, wait. She would definitely drop his name. Then, she could—

Her phone rang on full volume, ripping through the library like a bullhorn. She fumbled with it before some librarian could hunt her down. "Yes?" She hissed behind her hand.

Freddie listened as one of her best informants at the Baltimore PD filled her ear with pure gold. Holy shit. *Ho—ly—shit.* She pulled up the silenced alerts on her phone until she found

the Amber alert, now five days old.

The Lecter Baby story could go to the back burner for a few more days. She had a new serial killer fish to fry…*after* she checked out the social deviancy section to see which of her articles had made the cut to academia.

****

"This is all we have?" Will pulled off his headphones and dropped them next to the old fashioned tape recorder. Listening to Clive Morley's taped confession for a fourth time wasn't going to do any good. Most of it was just the angry shouts of the arresting officers anyway, demanding 'why? Why!?' until they must have been pink right up to their early 50s crew cuts.

Criminal psychology had been less than sophisticated in 1952.

Jack tossed a curled and yellowed police report on the table and rubbed at his weary face. "I'm working on it. We have seven vics, and only two of them had killer fathers who were active in this damn century. So far."

Jack glanced at his watch, as if actually keeping tabs on how many hours and minutes had passed since they had found Melanie Prylor's body. Only four days had separated the sixth and seventh victims, and they were now on day ten. Will looked at his cheap digital watch and blinked. December 20th. Maybe their guy was taking a long Christmas break.

Or maybe he's running out of easily attainable victims.

"We're not going to find what we need in police reports and pre-trial interviews. This is…" Will hesitated. Jack had a terrible habit of taking his words and running with them, usually in the wrong direction.

"This is what?" Jack pressed.

"This is personal."

"Killing off their kids is personal. Tell me something I don't know."

Will closed his eyes to cover their roll. "I mean the connection we're looking for is going to be something personal. Their crimes are public, their confessions and the affidavits of the arresting officers are all public. I need—" He leaned forward and dug in one of the boxes for something he had seen earlier. Yes, a transfer order for the father of the third victim. Joshua Barnell, transferred in 1989 from Attica to…the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

"Why was Barnell transferred out of federal prison?" Will asked, flipping through the documents.

“His insanity defense failed at trial, but he wasn’t in the prison even six months before he had a full psychotic break.” Jack consulted another file. “He killed his cellmate with a bar of soap and the guards found him eating the guy’s hair one strand at a time.”

“How do you kill someone with a bar of soap?”

Jack slapped the file closed. “Don’t ask.”

Will pulled another file from the box, then another and another. He should have seen this hours ago, but he was so busy looking for trees he had ignored the forest. “Four of them were inmates at the BSH. Marcus Prylor, Joshua Barnell, Sean Lamott, and Lucas Reed is still there.”

“You think that’s the connection?”

“No, that’s only four out of the seven, but if they were declared criminally insane, that means they were patients. Which means—”

“Psyche evals, therapy sessions notes. Things gets pretty personal when you're having your head shrunk.” Jack’s eyes narrowed on the new lead. He reached for his phone. “I’ll wake up the DA and put him on getting a court order. What?”

Will’s expression must have said it all. “You’re not going to get a court order for confidential medical records. No judge is going to sign that.”

“We have an active serial killer on a spree with a clear link between the victims. And three of them are already dead,” Jack boomed, as if his passion was enough to leap the hurdles of the justice system. Usually it was, but not for a medical release warrant.

“They aren’t suspects or victims. They’re just related to the victims.” Despite everything he had seen, Will could still confidently say that the legal aspect of their jobs remained his least favorite part. It was difficult to ignore how many people would still be alive if Kade Prurnell hadn’t been so worried about the details of Hannibal’s Fourth Amendment rights. “Hunting for leads isn’t probable cause.”

“No warrants for fishing expeditions.” Jack looked ready to crush his phone in one hand, but stopped and jabbed his finger on the table suddenly. “Wards of the state. The criminally insane are wards of the state, so their medical records would be under the discretion of their attending doctor. Then they would have become hospital property after the inmate’s death.”

A dead weight settled in the pit of Will’s stomach. In an unwelcome flash of memory he saw green eyes staring at him, blazing with fear and betrayal from behind a gun with the safety still clearly on. Then, later, dull and empty as the remaining one blinked up at him through a morphine stupor. Jack, judging from his triumphant smile, had yet to figure out the bad news.

Jack was doing that a lot lately, much to Will's dismay. Half-cocked seemed to be his new default position. Will wondered if it was guilty overcompensation for his months of wavering on Hannibal. In any case, it didn't bode well.

“Great.” Will stood and winced at the tight pull of his abdomen, as if he needed the reminder. “Do you want to go beg Frederick, or should I?”

Jack frowned at him for a second, then another, before he tossed his phone down on the table. “Son of a bitch!” .

“Bad time?” Came a familiar voice from the doorway.

“What, Zee?!”

Zeller, who stood in the doorway still wearing his lab coat, didn’t even flinch. A few years of working with Jack would immunize anyone to shouting. “I think we got something for you on those hairs. No DNA,” he said quickly, “but maybe a lead on where it’s coming from.”

They followed Zeller back down to the labs, both deathly silent on the previous subject of conversation. The weight in Will’s stomach only grew, which surprised him. He had thought he was beyond feeling much of anything anymore, especially guilt, but it would seem he was wrong yet again.

“Okay, what have you got?” Jack demanded as soon as they entered.

Jimmy Price stood behind one of the exam tables, looking through a magnifying glass at a series of hair strands stretched between pairs of forceps. “What we’ve got,” Price said with a grin, “is a hairbrush.”

Zeller waved a hand at his coworker’s obtuseness. “No, what we have are hairs that have come from a hairbrush. I would say all of them.”

Price side-stepped to a computer monitor and spun it around. A magnified image of a hair showed in shades of blue and white. Near the middle, the hair was bent off to the right like a kinked straw.

“Okay, see this bend here? We found them in every hair we’ve analyzed so far, and most of them had multiple bends.” Zeller pointed to the image, running his finger along the outside of the hair’s bend.

Jack crossed his arms. “Okay.”

“The bends are tight,” Price cut in. “Too sharp to be a natural feature of the hair or the result of intentional styling.” He lifted a wide paddle hairbrush from a nearby tray. It had wide-spaced bristles with plastic ball tips, the sort someone with thick hair might use.

Zee took a piece of thin string and pulled it around one of the bristles. “See that sharp bend? With multiple brush strokes, and switching side and direction, this string would be tightly tangled up in this brush in no time.”

“Leave it sitting in that position for a while and the hairs will hold the bend,” Price added.

“Just like pressing flowers in a book.”

Price laid a hand on Zeller's arm. "You know that's how they iron heat sensitive garments. Stress and press."

"Seriously?" Zee said.

"At the dry cleaners they have these big padded boards with—"

"Jimmy," Jack cut in. "The hairbrush."

"Right. Yes, well, another thing we know is that our mystery hair source is brushing her, or his, hair while it's still wet. My mother always said that was a no-no. Leads to breakage and split ends."

"*But,"* Zee continued, stalling Price with his own light touch on his forearm, "this is also the likely reason we haven't gotten a root on any of the hairs. All of them are broken off, or the hairs separated from the root when they pulled out because they were weakened by water."

Jack's eyes rested on the floor, considered, but he still said in a gruff voice, "And how does this help us?"

"The killer doesn't have whoever this hair is coming from," Will thought aloud. He could see it now, the hairs in the mouth, wrapped carefully around the tongue so as not to break them. The hair around the tongue…the person the hairs came from on the tongue…

"Exactly!" Zee grinned. "I mean, if our guy has access to the mystery dark blond, why pull kinked up strands from a hairbrush?"

"Okay, so," Jack began, lifting one finger, "we know this hair is important to him for some reason. He left it for us to find, just like he left everything else. If this guy is working his own revenge on serial killers, maybe the hair is from a past victim, someone he cared about who was murdered. That would explain why he's getting them from a hairbrush."

No. Doesn't feel right.

Price made a doubtful sound. "Possible, but it would have had to be a recent death. None of these hairs have been in that brush more than a year, probably much less."

Will noted the pent up excitement in Zee's posture and sighed. Will had to give him credit, though; he loved his job. "How can you tell that?"

"From the chlorine!" Zee declared with a clap of his hands.

"Here." Price lifted a white board from a nearby table, similar to a clipboard. A small bundle of hair was fixed under the clip and left to hand down the board. "These is all the hairs so far, taken from all seven victims. Smell."

Jack scowled and didn't move.

"Okay, don't smell the hair that was in the mouths of dead people." Zee agreed with a grimace. "But, take our word for it. They're covered in chlorine residue. All of them."

“We did a microscopic bisection on some of the strands, and the chlorine wasn’t present any deeper than the first five or ten micrometers.” Jimmy lifted his hands, speaking animatedly. “Now, regular humidity would have kept these hairs wet enough to allow the chlorine to continue seeping in over time, but since we only have chlorine on the outermost layers, it means the hairs were exposed to chlorinated water recently.”

Jimmy and Zee continued to explain their process, but their voices became a muffle in the distance. Will saw his hands as they held the brush, his fingers as they carefully gripped a single strand to pull it free from the tangles. One after another, he pulled, discarding those too short to wrap around the tongue that would tell the world what he wanted it to hear. Each dead monster telling the same tale.

“Speak of the devil.”

Jack looked up. “What?”

“Tongues are for talking,” Will muttered, barely hearing himself, “and he’s using theirs to tell us what he wants. His goal.”

Jack's eye rounded. “The last victim on his list.”

"There's a list?" Zee and Jimmy said almost in unison, but Jack was no longer paying attention to them.

"Damn it." Jack paced off across the room, rubbing the back of his head. "If we just had one viable hair root we could get a familiar hit in CODIS and..."

Jack trailed off, his expression growing stormier by the minute, and Will couldn't blame him. The investigation was going off in too many directions, none of which held promise for leading to the killer. Getting DNA on the hair would tell them who the final victim's father was, assuming he had already been arrested and his DNA was in CODIS, but even that wouldn't give them the final victim’s name or location. Knowing the hair came from a hairbrush, that the killer did not already have his final victim secured, was sound information but ultimately useless. And suppose those two paths did eventually lead to the final victim, suppose they even identified this person and picked them up, it would still not stop the killing.

So far, their investigation had them chasing information about the victims while giving them nothing on the perp.

But that wasn't entirely true, was it? Their man wanted revenge for something, and he believed he was going to get it by killing the child of...of the person who had wronged him.

Every vigilante is working his own corner.

"We need to find out where this hair came from. Jack." Will pulled in a deep breath, the excitement he hadn't felt in over a year now coursing through his veins. "He's a surviving victim, or is related to a victim. That's what this is all about. If we can find who these hairs are coming from, that will lead us to the father and—"

"And we'll know who the father's victims were. So far, every one of them has been a known convicted serial killer." Jack's smile turned predatory. "And I'm willing to bet the last one is the same. But where the hell does chlorine and a hairbrush take us?"

Jimmy gave Zee a knowing look. "I'd say to a public pool."

Will smiled, unable to help it. Anyone who dismissed Price and Zeller as nothing more than eccentric lab techs was grossly underestimating them, even if Zeller still rubbed him the wrong way. "You said all the hairs have chlorine on them. No exceptions?"

"None." Zee grinned. "If it was a brush someone just kept in their house, in their bathroom, you would expect some or most of the hair to be free of chlorine."

"And where would you find a hairbrush full of nothing but chlorine soaked hair?" Jimmy clapped his hands together.

"In the locker room at a pool." Zee extended his fist, which Jimmy happily bumped with his own.

Jack was already heading for the exit as he motioned for Will to follow him. He did, but turned back at the last minute to give Zee and Jimmy a grateful nod. He was more than a little surprised at himself, since such a minor social act would not have occurred to him once upon a time. Zee returned the gesture, as if to say '*Yeah, I guess you're not so bad either.'*

Jack spoke over his shoulder as he walked. "You said his final victim is likely in Baltimore. That's where he's taking his victims, that's where he's displaying them. I'm going to call down to intel and get them to give us a complete list of every public pool and health club in Baltimore. He has the final victim's hairbrush, which means he stole it, which means he's been stalking this person from the beginning."

"We should get local PD to canvas the pools and ask the employees if anyone complained about a theft in the last six months. But..." Will stopped, leading Jack to do the same. "It's just a hairbrush. Most people wouldn't bother reporting it. We still need to follow the other lead and get those psyche records. The sooner the better."

Jack sighed through clenched teeth and checked his watch. It was already eight-thirty, and an hour and half drive to Baltimore. They could try calling, but Jack probably knew as well as he did how fruitless that would be. "Let's get going then. Fuck, I don't need this right now."

Frederick, Will suspected, was about to consider that feeling mutual.

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"...las estrellas brillan intensemente. Es la noche del nacimi—damn." Frederick flexed his left ring finger, testing its independent movement over the keys. He was rusty. Which was a

generous euphemism for his playing had turned to trash. At least his pitch was still good, despite the prosthesis. Not that anyone would hear it.

Dignified medical professionals did not *perform*.

Frederick snorted a laugh—actually snorted—and took another sip of his best Scotch. He lifted his glass to the empty room. “To Hannibal, and his fussy fucking harpsichord. May it fetch a mint at the police auction!”

He set the glass on the tray currently gracing the top of his cherrywood grande and started again, playing through the first few passages without singing. That was better. A good celebration required music, and Frederick was indeed celebrating. He was free of Hannibal, or at least he now finally felt that way. It wasn’t until a few days after Alana had left his office that he felt the albatross drop from around his neck. Ignoring the truth had worked for a while, but eventually he would have had no choice but to interact with Hannibal. Patient assessments, legal consultations, psyche evaluations, and he knew—he *knew*—Hannibal would have enjoyed every minute of Frederick’s discomfort.

Enjoy, Alana!

Once upon a time, he would have reveled in the daily reminder of Hannibal's fall. He would have waltzed down the dark corridors of the secure ward, his cane tapping as he luxuriated in the sight of someone who had looked down on him festered in a bare cell. It’s what he had done to Will Graham, after all—

Frederick pressed hard on a low chord, banishing the thought. He was celebrating. His usual self recriminations could wait for tomorrow.

“*¡Caigan de rodillas! ¡Oh escucha las voces del ángel! ¡Oh nooooche diviii—*” Frederick nearly leapt out of his skin, hands smashing against the keys as a loud banging sounded through the house. It was joined by the tasteful twinkle of the doorbell, which must have been lost in the sounds of the piano.

Who the hell would be at his door at door at ten o’clock at night? Or any time?

Frederick stood, then grabbed the edge of the piano for balance. He must have had a bit more than he thought. Thinking there might have been an emergency at the hospital, he looked around for his phone but didn’t see it. Damn. He made his way on bare feet to the front foyer and, before his half-drunk brain could think to look through the swirls in the frosted glass, opened the front door.

There, on his front steps, stood Jack Crawford, his fist still raised to knock. Will Graham was only a few steps behind, his hands shoved as firmly in his pockets. Frederick’s insides turned to ice, but it had nothing to do with the December cold now rushing through his foyer.

“Wh…eh…”

“Dr. Chilton, we need access to some confidential medical files in your custody.” Jack pulled a slip of paper from his coat pocket and held it forward. Frederick flinched before he could

stop himself. “Doctor?”

Frederick took the paper as if on auto-pilot. Why would they come to his home? Where they knew he would be alone? *What are they going to do to me now?* A miserable silence followed as Frederick’s grip on the paper tightened and a horrible weight seemed to slam into his chest.

“I didn’t know you played.” Will nodded toward the house beyond, his lips twitching curiously. “And sang.”

Frederick slammed the door so hard the glass rattled. He fumbled for the deadbolt, then spun around for the panel of light switches. Off, off, he plunged the front of his house into darkness. The weight on his chest increased, his heart pounding out of rhythm as if trying to escape his chest.

“Ah…oh, God—” He made for the stairs, desperate to flee from something, everything, but a wave of dizziness sent the world tumbling upside down. His limbs felt cold, numb, as if every bit of life in him was busy trying to explode his heart. It wasn’t until he felt the soft brush of carpet under his feet that he realized he had made it to the front den. He couldn’t breathe. He could hear his own manic panting, but it felt like an illusion. He wasn't getting any air, he wasn't...it wasn't working. He was going to die.

No, no… He dropped, realizing he had only when he felt the soft tufts of the carpet under his hands. The sensation shocked him, lifting his head just barely out of the fog of panic.

Panic.

He was having a panic attack. *Oh, you can’t be serious.*

The sound of his own snide disapproval in his head pulled him back somewhat. He was a doctor, for God's sake. Teaching patients how to mitigate a panic attack was old hat, so surely he could do it himself. His heart continued its frantic tap dance, but he pressed his cheek to the carpet and rubbed his hands across the soft fibers, back and forth, focusing on the sensation. Everything around him, the walls, the sofas, the black TV on the wall, were still there but nothing *felt* real, like he was in a nightmare. But he wasn't. The carpet was real, the floor was real. He *could* breathe, it only felt like he couldn't. There was no reason to panic, everything was fine.

Crawford and Graham were there on hospital business, that was all, nothing to do with him personally. Back and forth, back and forth. His chest ached and he coughed as he tried to draw breath. It didn't matter that he was in his pajamas, barefoot, with straight-from-the-shower hair and two days of stubble, absent even a shred of the usual armor he wore into the world...that Will Graham had seen him that way...had heard him sing...had barely been able to hold back his laughter.

"Argh!" His heart jolted again and the carpet under his cheek turned tacky with his sweat. No, no, stop. He drew a deep breath, imagining his whole body filling with air, then let it out long and slow. Again and again; breathe, back and forth, everything is fine.

Oh, God, never again would roll his eyes at one of his patients having 'yet another' panic attack. *¡Dios, por favor, hazlo parar!*

It did stop, with a shocking suddenness that left him exhausted and wondering how long he had been on the floor. His breathing was still heavy, but no longer out of his control. As he moved to stand, he felt his t-shirt and pants twist around him, both wet and clinging with sweat.

"Fuck." The miserable utterance echoed through the den and into the foyer. For the first time, Frederick didn't appreciate the clean marble expansiveness of his home. He wanted to wrap himself in five blankets and crawl into a dark closet.

On shaky legs he ventured into the foyer and glared at the locked door. Of course they were gone. He would have heard banging or shouts otherwise. So, he had humiliated himself before Will Graham and Jack Crawford, yet again. The recurring theme of his personal human comedy. Fantastic.

As he turned away, now desperate to shower again and fall into bed, he spotted the folded slip of paper he had taken from Crawford, crumpled and forgotten by the front door. He smoothed it out and frowned at the short list of names and dates of birth.

Prylor? Reed? "What the hell is this?"

Nutcracker

Chapter Summary

A very active day in the life of Frederick Chilton

Chapter Notes

First, I apologize for the insanely long chapter (11K words). I like to keep my chapters scene/topic cohesive, and I just couldn't find a good place in this one to make two chapters. Enjoy =)

When Frederick arrived at the hospital ten minutes late the next morning, he was surprised not to find Crawford and Graham waiting for him. Crawford was bombastic and entitled as a matter of course, but Frederick doubted even he would have shown up at the home of someone he had wrongfully arrested without a pressing reason. Which was why the first thing Frederick did after shedding his coat was retrieve everything the hospital had on file for Lucas Reed, and sent his assistant and two others to the archives for the rest.

It was also why he soon found himself, yet again, drudging through the front page of Freddie Lounds' online rag. If Crawford and Graham wanted something, it would be related to a killing. What else did those two have in common? And if the crimes were substantial enough to bring Graham back into the fold, he could be damn sure TattleCrime would have gotten wind of it by now. Sure enough, the front story proved to be a scoop worthy of Freddie's journalistic aspirations.

ACTIVE SERIAL SPREE IN THE HEART OF BALTIMORE!

SEVEN DISMEMBERED BODIES AND COUNTING!

LATEST VICTIM ONLY TWELVE YEARS OLD!

He cringed as he skimmed through the story, not only from the horrid details but from the sheer volume of them. Someone had leaked to the press, and by Freddie's constant references

to ‘local police’ who ‘have spoken with sources inside the FBI’, he could imagine the sort of raging fit Crawford must be having. All the victims had been dismembered, hung for display, and had ‘undisclosed objects’ left inside their mouths. According to the story, Freddie had managed to confirm identities on only two of the victims; Melanie Prylor, and Benjamin Reed.

Marcus Prylor, and Lucas Reed.

Two of the victims were children of convicted serial killers, and Frederick didn’t have to revel in his skills of deduction to figure out that the other victims probably were as well. It would be too much of a coincidence otherwise. The FBI was probably looking for a vigilante killer, or someone who required the self-delusion of righteousness in order to fulfill his homicidal urges. The starkest of psychopaths entertained their own internal justifications for what they did, even if those justifications were as bland and predictable as saying morality didn’t exist, but when a killer put those justifications on display it often spoke to insecurity. The killer didn’t want infamy alone, he wanted approval. The fact that he was targeting the children of killers also suggested a religious aspect such as inherited sin, or perhaps pseudo-science beliefs in genetic determinism and eugenics—

Frederick looked down at the legal pad before him, now half filled with notes, and dropped his pen. What was he doing? He didn’t do this type of work anymore. And, as much as it pained his ego to admit, he never really had. Oh, he had tried. He had spent years writing profiles for the FBI, elbowing his way into the prestigious and narrow circle of FBI Profilers. He would read all the latest publications on abnormal psychology, spend his days subjecting himself to the most deviant criminal minds imaginable, and all that after years of clawing himself through private practice and obscure publication, only to be shunted aside in favor of someone with a *natural* gift…someone with faded flannel shirts and crooked glasses, who didn’t even hold a doctorate.

Will Graham could build in a day what it took Frederick weeks of analysis to cobble together.

He ripped the page from the pad and fisted it into a ball before tossing it toward the wastebasket. It was almost noon and he had yet to hear from Graham or Crawford. Perhaps there had been some other break in the investigation and they no longer needed anything from him. Good. It wasn’t as if he wanted to see either of them, especially not after last night’s humiliation.

He pressed the intercom on his desk.

“Doctor?”

“Please have the files I asked for brought down to the service entrance. I’ll be taking them with me today.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

He grabbed his coat and headed for the door while pulling his burgundy scarf smooth over the breast of his suit. It was one of his favorites, a three piece Kilgour he had commissioned in London a few years back, for a price tag that still made his eyes water. He had finally

slogged through the chore of getting his beleaguered wardrobe through the cleaners, and had taken advantage of the fact that morning as a simple return to normalcy. That was all. *Not* because he had expected to be ambushed by Graham at the hospital. As if he cared about the opinion of someone who dressed like a mid 90s L.L Bean advertisement.

Ellery would probably have something snarky and approving to say about it, though. He smiled. At least that was something. Just as he neared the door, his phone rang with the jaunty notes of a French horn.

Think of the devil… "Ellery? Did you remember we pushed up your session for today? I'm on my way now."

"I know. Keisha and Simon said the group is meeting to take the train at four. But, Doc—Yes, I'm asking him!—Doc, will you come with us to New York tonight?"

Frederick froze as he grabbed the door knob. He had spoken to a Mr. Avery, the music teacher at the high school Ellery's foster-siblings attended, a few weeks ago about letting Ellery go on their trip. It wasn't surprising that the real reason it had been 'too late' for her to go was the cost, and Frederick had mindlessly committed yet another breach of doctor-patient boundaries by paying for her spot in full. It had only been $250, practically nothing, and the music teacher had happily agreed to keep the source of the money quiet.

"Ah. And why would you want me to do that?"

There was a long pause, during which he was sure he heard a few shifty starts and stops. Finally, she said, *"The school has a chaperone policy for club trips. One chaperone for every four students. We had Mr. Avery and Mrs. Harris, but Mr. Avery had some family emergency today and can't go. We need another* adult*"*—he could hear the eye roll in her voice—"*otherwise we have to cancel."*

Frederick hesitated, his response stumbling over more than a few serious considerations. It was decidedly inappropriate to socialize with patients, but he was hardly *socializing* with a fifteen-year-old and a gaggle of other teenagers. No, the real problem was...well...he hadn't been anywhere in almost a year. His reality had been reduced to his house, the hospital, the campus, and a handful of stores in between. He had not yet subjected himself to being *seen*.

"Doc? My psychological welfare may be irrevocably damaged if I don't see people dance with giant nutcracker soldiers tonight. You can't have that on your CV."

"Oh, for God— That type of manipulation warrants a note in your file." He couldn't keep the amusement from his voice, and suddenly the idea of catching a train and seeing a show became as innocent and doable as it really was. He probably was overreacting a bit. Still, reality refused to be ignored. "I appreciate the invitation, but my history is not exactly savory. Some people believe just being accused of something—"

"None of them care about any of that, Doc. Trust me." She made a derisive sound. *"Keisha has a pink shirt that says 'fuck the police'. The first word is spelled with a Q."*

Frederick heard raucous laughter in the background, no doubt from the aforementioned Keisha. "Charming. Are you sure none of the other kids have parents who can step in?" It was for the best, really. All it would take was one person recognizing him from last year's gory media coverage, and the night could turn into a living hell.

Another pause followed, interrupted by a small sigh into the phone. *"I shouldn't have asked. You have better things to do than babysit patients. We'll figure something out. See you later, Dr. Chilton."*

Dr. Chilton? Frederick felt suddenly, and unaccountably, ill. "No, no, that's…It's not a problem. I haven't seen a ballet in years. You're meeting at the train station at four?" This was a bad idea.

"Yes! And I should have mentioned first that I have to cancel our appointment today. I have to find something to wear because Keisha"— yet more laughter in the background—"*didn't tell me until today that everyone is dressing up formal. Apparently that's 'half the fun.'"*

"It is!" Someone shouted.

"Mr. Avery said it's 'black tie optional.'"

Frederick closed his eyes and tried to ignore the knot forming in his stomach. "Do you know what black tie optional means?"

"The men have the option of wearing a black tie."

"Not exactly."

"Then they should change what they call it. I'll see you in the main terminal at Bal-Penn at a quarter to four. The train waits for no one, Doc. Bye."

He slipped his phone back in his coat pocket and checked his watch. He had four hours to get home, get ready, and get to the station. More than enough time, assuming the staff had finished retrieving the files he needed. He *could* leave the files there, with a note to release them to Crawford or Graham should either of them show up, but…he didn't want to. Why should he be that accommodating? Lucas Reed was still, technically speaking, his patient. If the FBI had some renewed interest in him now—doubtful, since the man had not uttered a coherent phrase in years—Frederick was damn sure going to get an explanation before he risked his license on a breach of confidentiality. And if Graham or Crawford came looking for him tonight, they could just wait.

He had plans...to chaperone teenagers…in New York…at night.

What have I done?

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The eighth body dropped a mere two hours after Freddie Lounds' story. Considering the time and logistics necessary to dismember a body and hoist it up behind a seedy 7-Eleven, the one had had no impact on the other. Will knew Jack understood that, but temper and understanding didn't always meet.

"No, listen to me! Someone in your department leaked information to the press. I w—I don't care if there was a three state manhunt underway. It was Baltimore PD that found the body!" Jack continued to rage into his phone, his breath visible as he paced near the 7-Eleven's propane cage. "And now I have crazies online naming people with serial killer relatives. There are people out there *encouraging* this son of a bitch."

He took a long draw of his lukewarm coffee and watched from a distance as the techs lowered the body to a waiting bag. The victim was a woman in her late twenties or early thirties, black, with long hair worn in narrow braids. Non-white serial killers were rare, which would have made identifying her relatively easy even without the driver's license left in her mouth. Terri Dixon, daughter of Jacob Dixon, who had been convicted of killing and mutilating nine prostitutes in the Dallas area in 1985.

Jack continued to rant at the Baltimore PD, and with good reason. Freddie had not mentioned anything about the serial-killer parentage angle in her article, but she had identified two of the victims, which was more than enough. Her rabid readers had already made the connection, just as she had probably intended. While the 'crazies' encouraging their killer were few, their online presence was the most prolific.

They would have to keep watch for copycat killings now, but that wasn't the most frustrating part, at least not for Will. The commenters on TattleCrime.com had spent the pre-dawn hours making reference to a story Freddie had published in May, when Will's entire focus had been on finding a way to Italy without Jack stopping him. Against his better judgment and growing migraine, Will had broken down and the read old story, scoffing into the silence of his motel room.

Hannibal might have a child he never knew? Tabloid tripe built on nothing but circumstance and innuendo. It was the crap of daytime soaps and 80s era best sellers, reprised and repackaged for the digital age, nothing more. And yet, the coincidence left him feeling cold and unsettled. Freddie publishes a dry-spell piece of fodder about the most notorious serial-killer in a generation possibly having a child, and then someone starts killing the children of serial killers?

It was an exercise in divergent paths to imagine what Hannibal's reaction must have been like when he read the story, for he most certainly had. Hannibal would not have given up the pleasure of reading about himself, even in hiding. Did he smile, just a bit, laughing at Freddie's desperation to keep writing about him despite having no new leads? Or did he glare at the tablet screen, flicking him index finger hard across his thumb in one of his few outward signs of agitation? Would he have been insulted by the suggestion that anyone, especially some lab technician, could have violated him so grievously without his knowledge? Did he dismiss the story as fictional trash, or did he…wonder?

"Will? Will!"

"I *am* here, Jack."

"Sometimes I wonder. Look, we're about done here and I want to coordinate with Baltimore PD on the pool canvas. If you're good to swing by the hospital…" Jack trailed off, pressing his lips as if a new thought had occurred to him. "On second thought, I can go by the hospital and talk to Chilton—"

Will's bitter laughter cut him off. "Are you so worried about me, you think I can't step into the same building with him?"

Jack's hesitation spoke volumes, as did his instant understand of which 'him' they were referring to. "Should I be?"

I am.

"Not going to dignify that with a response." And he didn't know what to say, not when the idea of being in the same building with Hannibal sent his thoughts in uncomfortably conflicting directions. He had meant what he said that night in Wolf Trap. He didn't want to see Hannibal, didn't want to know about him or think about him, but he had spoken those words like a drunk saying he no longer wanted the bottle. An addiction doesn't care what you want.

"Fine. But let's also consider that you were stuck in that place for three months, and that would make anyone want to stay clear. Besides…" Jack pretended to watch the scene techs work. "…after his reaction last night, maybe you're not the best person to be asking Chilton for favors."

Neither of them were. In fact, the only person Frederick probably had less interest in helping with anything was Hannibal. Will brushed his fingers under his left eye, feeling the thin flesh and solid point of his cheekbone. Even if the bullet itself didn't touch the cheekbone, missing it by millimeters, it would be destroyed anyway. The cavitation of a 9mm bullet wasn't that impressive, as far as calibers went, but it would have been enough to reach the lower part of the cheekbone and shred the surrounding tissue as the bullet paced through at supersonic speed. The disturbance around a bullet passing through flesh often caused more damage than the lead itself. Drop a large rock in a pond and listen to the violent clap of the water as it rushes in to fill the vacuum. Physics in action.

The bullet had never touched Frederick's eye, but he'd lost it anyway.

Will dragged a suddenly shaky hand over his face, smooth and scar free. "As far as nightmares go, I would think being chased through the snow by someone who wants to shoot you would be prime fodder, Jack."

"He didn't slam a door in my face until you mentioned his singing."

Good singing. Surprisingly good. "I'll go." He held his hand out for the keys. "I left my car at Quantico."

Jack tossed him the keys with a defeated slump, no doubt realizing that he would have to spend the day in a car with Jimmy and Zee. Will enjoyed a petty smile as he climbed into the SUV and set his mind to the task at hand. It was past two o'clock, and would take him more than forty minutes to reach the hospital. During Will's imprisonment, Frederick had seemed to live there, coming to harass and question him at all hours. But things changed, and judging from what he had witnessed and heard so far, Frederick was one of those things.

He called the hospital to confirm, and was both surprised and not surprised to hear that Frederick had already left for the day. Once he reached the interstate, he headed north instead of south.

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Frederick examined himself one last time in the hall mirror. He had purchased the modern tuxedo—a stark departure from his usual look—only a few weeks before *it* all happened. The shawl style collar was done in black satin, shimmering against the otherwise flat black of the suit. To take the formality down even further, he wore a standard black satin tie as opposed to a bow, and no waistcoat. The sales clerk had talked him into it with more than a little flattery, telling him that the narrower waist and rounded collar would accentuate the width of his chest—*'always show off your best qualities, sir'.* Frederick was a pathetic sucker for flattery, rare as it was.

He supposed he looked…okay.

God, what was he thinking? He was about to spend two hours on a train with a bunch of fifteen year olds, probably in prom regalia. He was *overdressed.* Perhaps he should have regrown his beard. The ID badge photo the FBI had used to destroy his life in the media had shown him clean shaven, so a beard would at least help to throw off recognition. It was too late now, and the mere thought of calling Ellery and canceling with his apologies left a sour taste in his mouth. She would use her finely crafted walls to hide her disappointment, perhaps insist she had not really wanted to go anyway, but Frederick would know. He couldn't do that to her.

He draped his coat over one arm—his favorite with the plush wool collar—and headed for the door, keys in hand. He opened it to the sound of feet coming to a scratching halt. There stood Will Graham, halfway up his front steps, looking like a deer in the headlights.

Or a cat interrupted mid-pounce.

"Frederick," Will said, standing straight and shoving his hands in his coat pockets.

He waited, fearful that his panic of last night would return, but his breathe came easy and his pulse picked up only a bit. It took only a second's perusal to see that the months had been kind to Will, though how could they have been worse? The last time Frederick had seen him--really seen him, since last night hardly counted-- was in Crawford's office, gray skinned and

tacky with pain sweat. Once again he was all porcelain and cream behind a close-cut beard, like something lifted straight from the pages of an English hunting magazine.

Christ.

“Mr. Graham. Whatever you’re here for, it’ll have to wait.”

“I can see that.” Will’s eyes raked over him in a quick up-down motion, so fast Frederick wondered if he imagined it.

Heat prickled the back of his neck, and only the grip of his coat kept him from reaching to cover the left side of his face. And he knew he shouldn’t have risked such a modern cut tuxedo, a man his age. He must look like a fool.

“Good to know your eyesight is still sound. If you’ll excuse me.” Frederick closed and locked the front door, but when he turned back it was to see Will standing firmly in the middle of the stairs, his arms out on either railing to block him.

Frederick’s heart pounded, shaking his limbs and causing him to take a clumsy step back into the now locked door. “W-what do you think you’re doing?”

Will frowned, confused, before he looked down at himself. He pulled his hands away from the railings and stepped to the side, clearing a path. He raised and open hand. “Relax, Frederick—”

“I’m perfectly relaxed.”

“I’m not here to hur—cause you any trouble.”

Laughter lodged in Frederick’s throat, so bitter it tasted like poison. “Oh? In that case, good evening.” He forced himself not to run down the stairs, to lift his chin and move with some kind of dignity as he headed for the sanctuary of his car. He should be enjoying this. He should be reveling in the cosmic turnaround of Will Graham needing something from him, but he just couldn’t. Not when it was actually happening in real life and not the stupid self-indulgence volleys of his daydreams, wherein he delivered the clever lines and solved the puzzles and hosted entertaining parties full of people who sought his company. No, this was real, and he just…couldn’t.

For a moment, he thought Will might actually leave him be, but as soon as he reached the driveway he heard a muttered curse followed by quick steps.

“We found another one this morning. He snatched her from her driveway in Dallas, and we found her strung up behind a convenience store just like the others.”

Frederick had his hand on the door handle, his keys ready.

“We need to know how he’s choosing them, because it isn’t by convenience. There are fourteen likely victims in the tri-state area alone, but he hasn’t touched one of them.”

Frederick dropped his hand and swallowed down the bitter ball in his throat. This wasn't about Will Graham, and it sure as hell wasn't about him. "You mean fourteen children of serial killers?" When Will didn't respond he turned around. "What? Are you surprised I figured out that much, after the list Crawford gave me? Give me some credit."

Will averted his gaze. "Okay. We need to know what's special about these victims, or their fathers, so I *need* to see private documents you have on the four who were at the hospital. It's only four out of seven—eight, now, but it might be enough to show us the pattern."

Frederick looked up at his house, then down to the coat he still held over one arm. Perhaps if he helped them find another last minute replacement—No! No, he was not going to let down the only person in his life he had yet to disappoint in one way or another. Patient or not, advisable or not, he could not deny that spending that one hour a week helping someone who seemed to actually like him had made the last year tolerable.

I'm going to the fucking Nutcracker.

"Fine." Frederick looked toward the black SUV sitting at the bottom of the driveway. This could work out in more ways than one. "I had everything brought out from the archives today. It's all sitting on my dining room table." He extended his keys, happily noting that his hand only shook a little. "Be my guest."

Will frowned at the keys before taking them. He looked at the house, then back at Frederick, his confusion only growing. "Are you—?"

"I need to borrow your car." Frederick extended his hand, waiting. This was perfect. He had wondered how everyone would be getting home once they returned in the small hours of the morning, and his car only sat two. He also wouldn't have to leave his vintage Porche in the public parking lot of a train station.

Will looked at the SUV, then back at Frederick. "You…want to borrow my car and you're letting me look over medical files in your house? Alone?"

"Yes, yes, before I change my mind. I have to go." He really did. If he stayed there one more second he would realize how many horrible decisions he was making. "But you can't take anything with you. Take all the notes you want, but not a single document or tape leaves my house. I could lose my license."

Will fished a set of keys from his pocket and handed them over. Frederick snatched them up before he could think better of it and headed down the driveway. It was almost at the SUV before Will shouted after him.

"What about the security alarm? The code?"

Frederick snorted. Yes, he had been meaning to fix that. "Hannibal destroyed it. Good evening, Will."

As he hauled himself up into the SUV—*really, these things are ridiculous*—and pulled away from the curb, he cast one last quick look at Will. The man was still standing in the same

spot, Frederick’s keys in his hand, looking bewildered. Frederick bounced a little in the seat and smiled, unable to help himself. It was almost as good as one of his daydreams.

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“*Oooh*. Damn!”

Frederick cringed as one of the boys standing in Ellery's group pointed at him and hooted, cupping his hand around his mouth like a bullhorn.

"That's gotta be him, right?"

Ellery separated from the tight gaggle of teenagers and headed toward him, but they followed at her heels en masse, along with a beleaguered looking woman who could only be Mrs. Harris.

Just as predicted, the kids were dressed with all the glitter and boundary pushing of a high school prom. He counted four boys and five girls, including Ellery, with the four boys sporting suits in various degrees of flamboyance. One wore white wingtip shoes and a fedora. As far as 1920s gangster costumes went, it wouldn't be half bad. The boy who had hooted at him wore a tux in a traditional silhouette and cut, only the entire thing was a deep plum purple. The girls...dear God, weren't they freezing?

Ellery, to his instant pride and relief, was wearing a surprisingly sophisticated boat-neck dress in gray velvet. Frederick was no expert on women's clothing, but he knew when he was looking at something expensive. He concluded, with a twinge of sadness, that it was probably more of her mother’s clothing.

"Doc." She met him with a wary smile, which seemed to be competing with the frown she kept casting over her shoulder. "That was Simon. Ignore him."

"Ignore me? Why?" Simon bounced to her side, along with a short dark complected girl sporting a glittery knee length dress in a matching shade of purple who could be his twin. In fact, their similar full cheeks and near identical bronze brown eyes made him suspect they were just that. "You're the one who said we'd recognize him cuz he'd be dressed real fine. Sharp suit!"

"I did not say 'real fine'," Ellery deadpanned. She nodded toward the shorter girl. "This is Keisha."

"Hey!" Keisha waved, her wrist jangling with half a forearm of bracelets. "You remember me from the phone?"

"I do, yes."

"Hey, at least I said it was cuz of his suit and not his ‘heinous crimes’," Simon cried, returning the attention to himself to with a laugh. "Man, I heard all about that mess! Crazy!"

Dios ayudame.

"Simon!" Mrs. Harris hissed. She moved forward, a tense looking woman in her mid-thirties with graying red hair a purse the size of the duffle bag. "Mist--eh, Dr. Chilton. Thank you for joining us last minute. The kids would have been so disappointed after all their hard work."

"Not at all." Yes, no problem. He had only given Will Graham the keys to his house and left him there alone in an asinine knee-jerk decision influenced by pride and momentary stupidity. "As I told Ellery, I haven't seen a ballet in years."

"Oh, okay. Well..." Her eyes lingered on his left cheek a little too long before she pulled them away with a start. "It's three-fifty, everyone, let's get going. Platform two.” She moved off on quick feet, leading the group's slow procession through the columned main terminal. Ellery lingered behind with him, as did Simon and Keisha. The others didn't seem in any hurry to join Mrs. Harris in her flight either, choosing to move slowly as they conversed and shot him varying looks of curiosity. Frederick felt a flush of heat rise over his collar when, he was certain, one of the girls took a picture of him with her phone.

"Is the night's entertainment Tchaikovsky, or me?" He said, trying for amused but probably sounding irritable.

"Why not both?" Simon quipped.

"Yeah, double feature!" Keisha bumped her hip into Simon, sending him into a comically overdone stumble.

"Watch that thing, Keish! Dangerous!"

Ellery looked up at him, an etch of worry between her brows. "I didn't realize the rest of them would recognize your name so easily.”

“Ah, man, don’t freak out.” Keisha turned, but continued to walk backwards, an impressive feat on sparkly platform heels.

“Yeah, we know all about you getting framed,” Simon added. “Anyway, you’re not like TMZ famous, just…eh…Baltimore Sun famous. Oh! But that one reporter on channel 4 did have that one line. You remember, El?”

“No.”

“Yeah, he said, ‘Chill, Baltimore, the Chesapeake Ripper is on ice’, but on the bottom of the screen they always had the ‘chill’ in caps on his name. Ya know, like *CHILton.*”

Frederick balked, unable to help himself. *Chil*ton? Chill? That was so…stupid.

“Mmm-mmm,” Keisha sing-songed. “You better stop, Si. She getting that look on her face again. Yeah, that one.”

Sure enough, Ellery's shutter-eyed expression of disapproval looked like it could freeze a bowl of soup.

Simon made an exaggerated leap back, both hands up. "Damn, El, okay. Good to meet you, Dr. Chilton, who I know nothing about and have never heard of ever."

It wasn't the most comfortable situation, but even in the last few years Frederick could honestly say he had be subjected to worse. The passive-aggressive snipes of his better known colleagues and the denizens of Baltimore high society were designed to cut deep and leave no evidence; the plausible deniability of those who couched their barbs in metaphors and innuendo. By comparison, the vulgar bluntness of a curious teenager was almost refreshing.

Frederick extended his hand to Simon and they shook in a mock display of adult formality. "And you as well, Simon, whom I have also never heard of and who Ellery has never once complained about in her sessions."

"What!" Simon turned on Ellery. "You complain about me? What'd I do?"

Ellery only lifted her brow.

"I said she *doesn't* complain about you." Frederick glanced at his watch, then waved his hands towards the platforms. "Come along."

The group paraded onto the train, where they occupied a car to themselves. Amtrak had seen better days. The kids jockeyed for the window seats they wanted while Mrs. Harris took the back seat near the door, no doubt to keep an eye on everyone and make sure no one tried to slip out into another car. Frederick took a row to himself and laid his coat over the dingy blue seat. On the rare occasions he did take the train, he always opted for the swiveling leather seats of the business class car. It was going to be a long two hours.

He turned to Ellery, who had taken the row across from his to herself, to ask her what she knew about Lincoln Center, but stopped at the strange look on her face. She was turned around, one knee on her seat, as she looked around the headrest and down the center isle to the back door. She appeared to be looking through the glass of the doors and into the car behind them.

"Something wrong?" He asked, leaning out into the isle to follow her gaze.

She turned around and dropped in her seat, shaking her head. "No, just thought I saw someone."

From the tone of her voice, he suspected the someone she thought she saw wasn't welcome, but before he could ask her about it two bright soprano voices echoed along the length of the car.

"Hark how the bells, sweet silver bells, all seem to say throw cares away!"

Two alto voices joined in with bell-like *dings* and *dongs*, followed by the tenors and basses of the boys, until all eight of the formally rowdy teenagers were filling the car with the

counterpoint perfection of music. He had almost forgotten that these kids were in a madrigals club. And they were good.

Ellery gave him a smug smile, as if reading his thoughts, and lifted her phone to record.

Perhaps it wouldn't be such a long two hours after all.

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Will had never seen the inside of Frederick's home. He had been spared presiding over that particular bloodbath, and no reason for him to view the crime scenes photos had ever come up. Now that he was there, alone and free to look, he was...surprised.

It was not what he had expected.

White bare walls, huge swaths of clear countertops and empty tables. The furniture was sparse and so pristine is might have arrived from a catalogue yesterday. Remembering the tang of blood as it had dried on Frederick's clothes that day in Wolf Trap, he wouldn't be surprised if some of the furniture was new out of necessity.

What surprised him was how little the home matched its owner, or at least what Will had come to understand about him. Frederick's office at the hospital was ornate, filled with medical awards, antique books, and various exotic trinkets intended to show off his international travels. He wore plaid three-piece suits and carried a silver headed cane. If there was one thing Frederick Chilton was not, it was a minimalist.

Will shut the thoughts about his surroundings, and their owner, from his mind and flipped the lid off another document box. He had been at it for hours, folders and journals strewn over the table, not to mention a healthy collection of old floppy disks and cassette tapes. He would have to get to those another time. So far, the session notes and writing exercises of Joshua Barnell had yielded no breakthroughs, but he hadn't expected it to be that easy. He was looking for a commonality, and he wouldn't find that until he became familiar with all four of the killers whose final years now sat before him in dusty boxes.

The sound of the central heating kicking on gave him a start, and an uncomfortable reminder that he had been holding his bladder for the last twenty minutes. Will shoved his chair back and went in search of a bathroom. With that accomplished, he ambled back through the kitchen and considered the risk to his future document access should he drink some of Frederick's obscenely expensive bourbon. Considering Frederick had given him his house keys with their history already as bad as it was, a little missing whiskey wouldn't tip the scales.

The liquor decanters gleamed in a glass tray next to a white bowl that contained another set of keys—a smaller collection, the sort used to open shed doors and padlocks—as well as a flashlight and one of those thick rubber bands often found around home delivered

newspapers. Will could see it now, the narrow counter space just a few steps into the kitchen from the garage door, that first point of contact in any home where bags were dropped and keys discarded, where the weight of what you needed outside was shed so you could relax within.

He poured a few fingers of bourbon and looked over the counter space, which was thus far the most lived-in part of the house he had seen. There was a framed cork board on the wall behind the liquor tray, almost invisible behind the low hang of the cabinets above. He leaned down to get a better look at a large piece of loose paper that had been fixed to the frame with a magnet, only to laugh aloud at the sight. It was a picture, a drawing specifically, of Frederick. He was seated in a large chair, legs crossed, with his elbow perched on the armrest as he twirled that damned gold pen of his. But it was the expression on his face that caught Will's attention. He was rolling his eyes, but with a soft smirk, almost like a showing of affectionate exasperation.

He was tempted to contemptuously note that the first personal picture he'd seen in the house would be, of course, a picture of Frederick himself, but something held him back from the harsh judgment. A self portrait procured on vanity wouldn't be fixed to a corkboard next to the junk mail and second set of keys. He had also bothered to use a magnet, sparing the paper any tack holes. Curious—more so than he cared to admit—Will pressed down the bottom edge where the paper had started to curl and saw a simple signature: E.C. '14.

Will downed half the bourbon in one throw. Frederick had shown up on his porch, bloody and desperate, in early January, which meant the sketch before him had likely been made in the few days before that. But by who? For the month after Frederick was shot, when Jack and the FBI were still firmly fixed on his guilt, they had torn Frederick's life apart searching for any and all accomplices. Anyone who might have known anything, concealed anything, and that had of course meant questioning romantic partners, family, and close friends. When investigators turned up virtually nothing on all counts, Jimmy and Zee had spent the day making Lonely Hearts Club jokes. Will had gone to visit an unconscious Frederick in his hospital room.

To continue his innocent examination—it wasn't snooping if the stuff was just left out— he moved to what appeared to be a homemade birthday card. The front featured a cartoon cake overflowing with candles and wrapped in...crime scene tape? It was tacked to the board through the back, leaving the front fold open. He leaned in to read the small print, only to jerk back as a metallic crash tore through the kitchen.

Will snapped his head in the direction of the noise, which seemed to have come from the back of the house around the pool. Sunset had been hours ago, but small solar lights outlined the pool's edge and low walls. He moved through the kitchen and leaned close to the glass, listening until he heard another scrabble of metal, this time followed by the distinctive cry of an animal in pain.

He fumbled with the seams of the glass wall, which was basically the entire back of the house, until he found the lock for the sliding door and pulled it open. Snow crunched under his feet as he skirted the pool and reached a low gate on the side wall, pushing it open on to a short flight of steps. At the bottom, just barely visible in the glow of the house lights, were

two overturned trash cans and the quivering form of a long eared dog. The gate hinge squeaked, sending the dog into flight, but it only managed a few steps before it stumbled and let up another pathetic whine.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay." He descended slowly and continued to hum soothing nonsense. The dog whined and made a few furtive attempts to flee, but it appeared to be injured in both front paws. As soon as it favored one leg, it stumbled to favor the other.

Hearing no growls or other warning signs, he got close enough to see the sparkle of broken glass near the mouth of the trashcan, from what appeared to be a shattered olive jar.

"Got yourself into some trouble, huh?" As soon as he was within arm's reach, the dog's tail started thumping and it—she—rolled onto her side in a show of submission. He gave her ribcage a few soothing rubs and noted the absence of a collar. She must not have been a stray for long, if she was at all, and basset hounds weren't the type of dog one saw roaming the streets.

"Come on, then. Let's have a look at it." She gave no resistance as he scooped a hand under her rear and draped her front paws over his shoulder. He wasn't halfway up the steps before she was licking the side of his face.

Once inside he could see the blood on her dingy white paws, though it didn't look too bad. Her swollen teats and sagging belly pointed to her having dropped a litter of puppies recently. In fact, her underside showed all the signs of a repeat breeder, which meant some craigslist asshole selling puppies out of his garage had probably used her up for a few years before leaving her on the side the road somewhere nearby.

He lifted one of her paws, rubbing the top gently. "Just a little glass, huh? Easy."

It turned out that caring for a bleeding dog in an unfamiliar house wasn't as easy as he assumed. Ten minutes later found him and his new charge on the floor of Frederick's master bath, with half the contents of a drawer piled onto the counter and half Will's attention of the bedroom beyond. Was that a Vonnegut novel on the nightstand? Was that an issue of *Pediatric Psychology?*

He was beginning to get more than a little frustrated with himself. Nothing about the arrogant and peacocking Frederick Chilton had ever interested him, yet now he found himself squinting into the man's bedroom trying to read the book titles on a low shelf. What had changed?

Him. Me. Everything.

A low whine brought him back to the task at hand.

"Ever heard of a first aid kit, *doctor?*" He groused as he pulled a small leather bag from the bottom of the drawer. "Finally." He pulled out forceps and a roll of gauze as he shuffled over to the tub where he had placed Maggie—she looked like a Maggie—to keep her from tracking bloody footprints everywhere. "Okay, here we go."

She whimpered a bit as he pulled the slivers of glass from her toes and wiped away the beads of blood. In no time she was thumping her tail against the side of the oversized tub and trying to climb her way out. Sure that the bleeding had stopped, he lifted her out and started to return Frederick's collection of hair products and unidentifiable toiletries to the drawer when his phone rang.

"Jack."

"We got another one."

"What?"

"You heard me. Turns out Terri Dixon had a twin brother. Son of a bitch must have snatched them both the same day. I need you over here, now. I'm texting the address."

Will looked down at Maggie as she waddled off into Frederick's bedroom to sniff at a pair of jeans left tossed over a chair. "I'm going through the medical files now. If this one is just a repeat of the last eight—"

"It's not, Will. He did things differently this time, and I want to know why." The phone pinged with an incoming message and Will looked down at the address, as well as the attached photo. Different was an understatement.

"You're sure this is him?" He knew the answer already. Jack wouldn't waste their time.

"Yes. The vic makes it certain, anyway, but the contents of the mouth are still the same. And Jimmy has a few ideas about the hair this time. Get here, quickly."

Jack didn't wait for a response before ending the call, which was probably for the best. Will shoved his phone back in his pocket, where the jingle of keys reminded him that Frederick had his car. He could call a taxi, but it might take half an hour to show up. With the decision already made, he pulled out the keys and rubbed the faded surface of a Porsche emblem.

"What do you think, Maggie? Beg forgiveness, or permission?" She nosed Frederick's jeans until they slipped off the chair to pool on the floor. "Forgiveness, it is."

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"Oh, my God! I'm telling you, ballerinas are *not human*. How are all their toes not broken?"

"Okay, but what about that one who stood on one toe and then had her other leg all the way up, like almost touching the back of her head."

"They do that in ice skating too. They grab the other leg."

"Yeah, but not on their toes!"

Frederick listened to the excited chatter with a wry smile as he finally reached the head of the line and placed his order with the frazzled barista. "Ellery?" She turned away from the cafe entrance and her observation of the grand terminal. "What would you like?"

She hesitated, her eyes darting to the menu board, before she joined him. "A cappuccino with whipped cream."

Keisha bounced up to his other side. "Ooh! Can I get a hazelnut latte?"

"Me too, with the chocolate curl things!"

The other kids quickly joined in, excited by the naïve confidence that an adult was present and thus paying. Frederick let out a reflexive huff of irritation, only to realize he wasn't really bothered. In fact, there was something oddly satisfying about their silly excitement as they crowded around him in pursuit of free caffeine and sugar.

He found Mrs. Harris at the rear of the group and gave her an encouraging smile. "Mrs. Harris? Would you care for something?"

"Oh. A latte would be nice, thank you." Over the course of the evening she seemed to have come to the conclusion that he was not, in fact, a serial killer who had managed to slip free of the FBI's legal clutches.

The barista, however, looked ready to commit murder as he rang up the litany of orders and took Frederick's Amex card. By the time the drinks started coming out he noticed that Ellery had returned to the café entrance, her dark eyes roving up and down the main terminal. It was almost eleven o'clock, but still the terminal bustled with people.

He approached with her cappuccino. "You aren't avoiding the minor age hoard, are you? That would defeat the purpose of the night's experiment."

She raised her brow, amused. "Are we doing therapy now?"

"Always."

"You could write a paper. 'Behavior traits of overachieving minors when returned to their natural habitat.'"

Frederick hummed, pretending to give the notion serious thought. "Without a control subject, the conclusions would be speculative at best. Publishing would be out of the question."

"Too bad."

As the others began collecting their drinks and gathering around the café entrance, Ellery's eyes darted across the terminal as if something had suddenly caught her attention. Frederick followed her gaze but didn't see anything out of the ordinary.

"What are you l—?"

"Did you enjoy the ballet?"

He was a bit taken aback by her sudden, and graceless, shift in subject. “Yes, of course. I expected nothing less from the New York City Ballet.”

“Oh, good! Good, I’m glad we could give you a night out, Doc.” She was grinning now, her voice loud enough to bring in the attention of the others. “You seemed to need it. Least we could do.”

Frederick balked at the insinuation, playful or not. “I believe *I* am the one who did you a favor tonight.”

“Oh, sure, Doc. Sure.” She gave his arm a patronizing pat, which now had the other kids grinning and snickering. Even Mrs. Harris, the age traitor, appeared to be smirking behind her latte. “We really appreciate it.”

Frederick made a huffy, and genuine, show of checking his watch. “We had better get to our platform now. It would be a shame if you missed the train and I had to leave you all here to freeze on the sidewalk.”

“Mrs. Harris wouldn’t let us freeze!”

“Oh? Mrs. Harris, I assume you’ll be with me if we’re forced to rent a car and drive back. A two-seater, I think.”

The formerly tense woman smiled. “I’ve been considering a change in career anyway.”

The kids let up various boos and melodramatic cries of distress as they departed the café and made their way down to the platforms. As soon as they were in the train car, which they once again had to themselves, Ellery took the seat across the aisle and turned to face him. Her expression was one he hadn’t seen before, wary and earnest.

“I know you paid for my ticket and the train.”

Oh. Frederick shifted in his seat, feeling suddenly exposed, which was absurd. As far as breaches of ethics went, he had done much worse in his career. He had the scar to prove it. “I see. I wish you didn’t. It’s not exactly professional.”

“I should care about that, but I don’t.” Her expression softened further, “Thank you. I had fun, but don’t tell them that.”

The ‘them’ made themselves known a second later when Keisha stopped in the middle of the aisle, the other kids waiting behind her like a suspenseful audience. She was digging to the bottom of her purse with a wicked grin. “Hey, Dr. Chilton, I almost forgot. I brought something for you. We all agree you definitely deserve it. You know, considering.”

Frederick sighed. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“This!” She pulled a baby pink shirt from her bag and snapped it out to reveal the slogan, printed in blue glitter. “Fuq da poliiice!”

“Fuq da poliiice!” The others echoed as they bounced in their seats and—*Dios, no*—took pictures of his doubtlessly red face.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Mrs. Harris shouted, or tried to, over the excited refrain. “Dr. Chilton, I’m so sorry.”

“Come on, Mrs. H, there’s no one else on the train.” Simon grabbed the shirt and waved it like a flag. "And they shot him *in the face.* I mean, if anyone had a good reason to say it..."

Ellery, who watched all of this with an expression far too superior for Frederick's liking, leaned across the aisle as he cupped a hand over his scalding face. “You were right, Doc. I should spend more time among my peers.”

“*Fuq da poliiice!*”

****

After a two hour train ride, during which most of the group had thankfully fallen asleep, and twenty minutes maneuvering the government issued SUV through the streets of Baltimore, Frederick had had plenty of time to conclude that he was an idiot. A knee-jerk, prideful, short-sighted idiot.

He had left Will Graham at his home with no discussion and no indication of how long he would be gone. He had taken the man's car, essentially stranding him there, only to remember far too late that neither of them had the same phone numbers they had a year ago. *And* he had left his house keys with Will, which meant if he did leave he had no way to lock the door and still allow Frederick to get back into his own damn house.

The only upside, in hindsight, was that he really did need the SUV.

"We're just up here. The blue house on the left." Keisha leaned between the front seats, where she had spent most of the ride fiddling with the radio and Frederick's last nerve.

"If you press that siren button again, I won't find it funny."

"You didn't find it was funny the first time." She grinned, his tone achieving nothing. "What I want to know is why you driving a car with a siren and police lights?"

"What better way to escape the scene of a crime?" Ellery smiled "Doc, where they right about you all along?"

"Yeah! He probably lifted it from some FBI agent he killed earlier today," Keisha added.

"Somewhere between the post office and the grocery store," Ellery said sensibly. "Two birds with one stone."

Frederick came to a stop before a large house that looked like it had once been a duplex. The yard was surrounded by a rusted chain length fence, worked through a liberal collection of weeds. He let out a sigh, much louder than he intended. "I don't find any of this funny."

Something in his tone must have registered, as Keisha cast her eyes down and drew back. "Sorry. Yeah, you probably don't like thinking about it."

Wonderful. Now he felt worse. "It's fine. Really. Simon, are you awake?"

Simon groaned some response as Keisha opened the back door and they both slid out. "Thanks for the ride! Better than taking the night bus."

Frederick allowed himself another frown at that, just as he had when they told him their foster-guardian, Mrs. Morgan, wasn't going to pick them up at the train station at one o'clock in the morning.

Ellery slid down from the passenger seat and turned back. Her expression was much like the one she'd had on the train when she thanked him for buying her tickets, both guarded and open at the same time, like someone standing at an cracked door with the chain still latched.

"Thanks again for coming with us. My mom used to take me to New York a lot, to go to the museums and central park. I know I could go myself, but it's not the same." She lifted her chin, the latched door opening another inch. "If you like the museums, if you go sometimes, I could...if you're going anyway..."

Something soft and warm, yet at the same time tragically cold, filled Frederick's chest. He could see that door she held wavering, ready to slam shut the moment he uttered the wrong word or made the wrong face. Frederick hoped, with every last ounce of malice in his bones, that the bastard responsible for killing Cynthia Caven fell down a flight of stairs.

"I would like that very much." He pulled at the cuff of his driving gloves, feeling suddenly awkward. Probably because he knew he wasn't speaking just for her benefit, wasn't making promises he fully intended to keep just for her sake, but also for his. The truth was, he liked Ellery. He enjoyed her company and doing things to make her happy, be it paying for some silly theater tickets or helping her understand herself better in therapy, made him feel good. It made him feel useful, something he was ashamed to admit he hadn't felt in years.

It gave him much to think about after Ellery said her goodbyes and he started the drive home. Twenty minutes later, exhausted and cold, he pulled up his long drive way to find it empty.

"Where is my car?"

He was relieved when he reached the front door and found it unlocked. The lights in the kitchen and dining area were still on, drawing him in that direction. "Will?" Several of the boxes on the dining room table were open, their contents arrayed around the seat where Will must have been working. Turning around, he spotted a glass on the counter, half full of his best bourbon and holding down a piece of paper.

JACK CALLED. HAD TO LEAVE. PLEASE FEED HER SOMETHING. The note ended with a hastily scrawled phone number.

"Feed? What the..." He could feel a headache coming on, not to mention a welling of anxiety. He pulled out his phone, then almost dropped it when he heard a dull thud through the cieling. He stepped back from the counter, looking up as if he could see into the second floor. "Will?"

A quick series of thuds sounded from the front hall in the direction of the staircase, followed by a manic percussion of clicks. A dog, short and heavyset, with long drooping ears and a face to match came barreling into the kitchen. It's whole body wiggled with the frenzied motion of its tail as it came right up to him and jumped, landing its front paws an inch shy of his groin.

"Oof!" He bent over on instinct, then shuffled back until the dog dropped down onto all fours. "No, no. Stay, eh, stay down."

Untrained, or simply uncaring, the dog came at him again, this time placing its paw on his hip in some valiant and futile effort to reach his face. Frederick reached again for Will's note, but paused when he saw something white hanging down from the dog's flopping jowl.

He pulled a shred of paper from the dog's mouth with pinched fingers, cringing in disgust, and recognized it as the blue sketch cover art from the copy of *Cat's Craddle* he'd had since college.

"Get. Down."

****

Will pulled up to the circus of blue and red lights while pressing his special investigator credentials against the window. The uniformed cop waved him along and he came to a stop next to a black SUV with federal government plates. The cars were positioned like a horseshoe around the side of the building, providing a barricade to keep the press and curious onlookers at bay. In addition to this, CSU has erected a makeshift wall of white canvas to cover the scene from view, because this was no filthy copse of trees behind a 7-Eleven. Their killers had chosen to hang victim number nine from the side of a building. A student dormitory on the John Hopkins campus.

He hoisted himself out of the low bucket seat and made straight for Jack, who was standing outside the canvas area next to Jimmy and Zee. Zee spotted him first, his jaw dropping as he darted his eyes between Will and Frederick's vintage Porsche

"Whoa, whoa. Isn't that Chilton's car?" Zee pointed like it was accusation.

Jack lifted both hands. "Where's the escalade?"

Will released a weary sigh. Did they have to care about this? "Frederick needed to borrow it."

Jack stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "He needed to borrow it? The government vehicle with CSU equipment in the back? Why?"

"He didn't actually say."

Jimmy and Zee exchanged speaking looks, while Jack just closed his eyes.

"I have to ask," Jimmy said as he leaned sideways to get a better look, "how does she handle? The impound guys had all the fun with that one when we still had it in holding. She really is a beaut."

"I had a roommate once who sold high-end sports cars." Zee positioned his hands at ten and two. "He described it as a car you don't drive so much as a point. Like a missile."

"Gentlemen, I do not care about this right now! Will." Jack lead the way to a flap in the canvas, the inside of which glowed with CSU's halogen lamps.

Andrew Dixon had been dismembered in the same fashion as the previous victims, but with one noticeable addition. His testicles had been removed and placed neatly in the snow below his hanging corpse. The rope and butcher's hook had been secured to a light fixture, of which the bulb and glass were broken.

"Surveillance?"

"Not a one," Jack snapped. "The back of this building faces another, there's no sidewalk or doors, and the students don't use it as a convenient pass through. And he broke that light. Glass is still on the ground. I've got people going through the footage from the surrounding area, but I think we can guess how that will go."

Cameras had caught a tall figure, face covered and body bundled up in an oversized generic coat, near three of the crime scenes already. None of it was useful. Will leaned over the macabre bowl their killer had formed in the snow and cringed as a jolt of a sympathy pain had him wanting to cross his legs. As with the removal of the limbs, there was no finesse or indication of surgical skill. Just a goal achieved by the quickest means.

But what goal this time? Mutilations like this typically stemmed from a sexual motive, but five of their nine victims had been men and this was the first to receive *extra* attention. Like everything he was doing, it was a message, only this time there was far less patience in the telling.

"He's getting frustrated with us," Will murmured. He understood the truth of it, *felt* it, like another man's coat falling over his shoulders.

"*He's* getting frustrated?" Jack paced a few steps, unable to move far in the restricted space. "Is this him trying to point us in the direction of fathers? We already got that."

"But he doesn't know that." Will dragged a hand down his face. "Freddie Lounds didn't explicitly mention the parentage link in her article. And that might not be what this is

anyway."

"Then what is it?"

Will turned around and faced the white wall of the canvas, the perspective Andrew Dixon would have had were he still alive. "Who found the body?"

"A couple of students screwing around in a dorm room on the third floor. One of them tossed the other's bag out the window and when they came down here to get it, they found the body."

"He avoided a more heavily traveled area because of the security cameras, but this is still much more public than where he's been leaving them. He wanted Andrew Dixon to be found, but not by us. Not by cops." Will faced Jack again, choking on a bitter laugh. "Those students will have social media accounts and I'll wager the photos they posted are already going viral."

Jack growled something unintelligible as he stalked out of the crime scene, canvas flapping behind him. With Jack gone, Will turned back to the worldly remains of a monster's son. The lips were slightly parted, where Jimmy and Zee had already cut the securing thread and removed the usual contents. As he looked, letting his eyes rove up and down until he was shaking with nausea, he saw the other subtle differences. There were more scrapes, brag burns, even bruising than he had seen on the previous victims, telling of a killer who had lost his satisfaction in the calm preparation, the soothing repetition of pattern. He had been in a hurry, angry...questioning himself.

"Have you ever told a joke you knew to be clever, only for no one listening to get it?" He whispered. Frustration, isolation, second guessing. The arrogant man would be confident in the stupidity of others, while the desperate man would begin to question his own cleverness. Question his design.

Our man is desperate.

He parted the canvas and swept out, eyes fixed on the neighboring building, the one Andrew Dixon's dead eyes now faced. "What is that building?" He asked no one and everyone.

A CSU tech looked down at her notepad. "Ramsen Hall. Houses the chemistry department."

He found Jack standing among a group of agents and Baltimore PD, pointing furiously at the dormitory as he issued orders, most of which would be fruitless. "Jack, the final victim is here."

"Wha—" Jack placed a hand on Will's shoulder and lead him away, out of earshot. "What?"

"His primary target, the one he's been trying to tell us about all along, is here."

"At John Hopkins?"

"Yes." *Yes, yes!* He knew it now, he could feel it, his/their frustration coursing through him like poison. "It's a student or a member of the faculty. He tried to tell us with the hair, but that didn't work because of how he got it. He's been trying to tell us by hinting at the father

with the dismemberment and the display, but none of this matches the pattern of any known killers, so he either messed up his copycat attempt or we're just not seeing it—"

"Hey. Hey!" Jack had him by both shoulders now, hunched down and forcing eye contact.

Will blinked, suddenly able to hear his panting breath and racing heart. Sweat prickled his scalp, now going cold in the frigid air. He shivered. He didn't want to get lost again. *Don't get lost.*

"Okay. I'm hearing you. But why would he want us to figure that out? If we knew who he's after, we could protect them."

Will swallowed, bile rising up his throat. "He either thinks we can't protect them, or that we won't."

"This crazy bastard really thinks he's doing God's work, doesn't he? And we approve of that?"

"Still iffy on the God part, but he definitely doesn't think they're innocent, and nothing he's done has cast us in the role of adversary. Remember, he's not taunting us. We're his..." Will choked on a bitter laugh. "We're his stage crew, cleaning up after every performance. We may not be on stage, but we're still part of the team in his mind."

Jack chose to ignore that last part. "Alright, so we get a list of the current staff, the student enrollment, and single out all the names matching—"

"The last name might be different from the father's."

"None of the other so far have been, except for the two women who were married." Jack pulled out his phone and started punching at the screen.

"There's over twenty thousand students here. Add to that the faculty and—"

"*And* we're a hell of a lot better off than we were yesterday. Twenty thousand is better than half a million. The good news is we might be getting a reprieve."

"How's that?"

Jack slipped his phone back in his pocket and motioned for someone to join them. Jimmy and Zee approached.

"The hair," Jack prompted.

"Oh. Well, the good news is our guy might be taking a break after this one." Jimmy lifted a glass vile and gave it a little shake. "I think he's run out of hair."

"The strands he used this time were too short to complete a full wrap around the tongue." Zee held his fingers a few inches apart. "There were only three of them. Again, broken off, no root, and just sort laid on the tongue."

Jimmy nodded. "My guess is they're his last. The dregs of the hairbrush, if you will."

Jack looked to him expectantly, forcing him to shift his eyes away lest he lose his train of thought. The hair was the single constant in all the killings, the unifying piece. He might have been willing to break pattern tonight, but the castration and change in dump site were additions, not subtractions. "He won't kill again if he doesn't have that hair. It's the...the mark he's putting on them, so he knows and everyone knows they all carry the same sin."

"So what? He's done?" Jack balked.

"He won't kill again until he replenishes his supply."

"How do we know he hasn't reached the end of his list?" Zee asked, looking between them. "I mean, maybe this one tonight was the last one from the regular batch and now he's ready to kill MDB."

Will tilted his head. "MDB?"

"Mystery Dark Blond." Jimmy shrugged. "We had to call them something."

"Will?" Jack pressed. "You think that could be what's going on here?"

Not a chance. Will looked back at the covered crime scene, then to the chemistry building across the way. "No. He wants the final target known, not just to us, but to everyone. He's frustrated that we haven't figured it out yet, that it hasn't been in the news. I think he..." Will tasted something sweet on his tongue, like second-hand vengeance. "I think he wants 'MDB' to know it's coming. He wants his final victim to be afraid."

Jack looked away, his brow knitting in thought just before his lips formed that gotcha smile Will recognized so well. "If he won't go for his final vic until he thinks we've identified them, that gives us leverage to delay his actions."

"What leverage?" Zee tossed up a hand. "We *haven't* identified 'em."

"When we do," Jack said, glaring, "we'll have to keep it out of the press. That means total lockdown..."

Will fished his vibrating phone from his pocket too see a Baltimore area number he didn't recognize. He swiped the green circle, only to fumble and palm the screen as he almost dropped it.

A bark, followed by a rustle of fabric crackled through the speakerphone. "Hello?"

"Where is my car, and why is there a dog in my house!?"

Horseman

“Just lie down somewhere and go to sleep! You have the whole house!” Frederick grabbed the edge of his pillow and curling it over his head, but it was useless. If it wasn’t the high pitched whine of sorrow, it was the snuffling of a nose trying to squeeze its way under his bedroom door.

Then came the howling. Honest to God, movie worthy *howling.* He had no idea domesticated dogs actually made that sound in real life! He threw the duvet aside and stomped to the door.

“You can’t possibly have to go again, not after what I already cleaned up.” Oh, he had cleaned. And then when he was sure he had found it all, he had cleaned some more. At least she had seen fit to avoid the carpets. Thank God for marble floors.

He threw the door open, prepared to issue a lecture to a dog that wouldn’t understand a word and wouldn’t care if it did, only to be met with a darting blur of fur between his legs. “Wha—no! Out!”

She was already on the bed, a four-legged shadow that went directly for the warm spot of bare sheets he had just vacated.

“No, no! Move, you’re getting hair all over the sheets.” She must have understood that well enough. She hopped to the other side of the bed on top of the duvet, and walked in a circle a few times before plopping down with a huff.

“Oh, are you irritated? Did you spend the small hours of the morning cleaning up after *me*?”

He could swear the look she gave him was guilty, eyes shifting sideways under her droopy brows, but he refused to fall prey to anthropomorphizing. He absolutely *would not*. Grabbing the edge of the duvet, he slipped back beneath the sheet with a sigh of exhaustion. He was sleeping next to a dog. There was a *dog in his bed.*

“You’re lucky it’s winter, or you would be in the garage.” An answering tail thump vibrated through the mattress. “Go to sleep.”

They both did, thankfully. By the time Frederick awoke, he had the late morning sun in his eye and a seventy pound dog in the curve of his back.

He should have shot Will Graham when he had the chance.

With that half-dreamed psychotic thought fading away, he forced himself to get up. He was midway through shaving when a hairy weight pressed against his leg, then stayed there even as he moussed and wrangled his fluffy hair into order. It followed him as he dressed in casual clothes and plonked down the stairs behind him as he headed to the kitchen.

“What is so fascinating, dog? Yes, yes, I’ll let you out in a moment. Better to do your business out there than in the hallway again—Aah!” Frederick’s heart leapt into his throat as

he turned the corner into the kitchen and spotted a figure at his dining table. Will.

“Oh, f...what are you doing here!?”

Will lifted a file and tapped it against the table. "The same thing I was doing yesterday. Unless you're about to tell me I've worn out my welcome."

"You weren't *welcome* to begin with." Frederick snapped as he went straight to the cupboard to pull down his French press. He managed to feign indifference to Will’s presence as he filled the kettle and set it to boiling, but his patience soon gave out. He turned back, fully intending to say something about his night of unwelcome surprises, only for his feet to collide with the worst of the surprises.

"Oh! Take your dog outside, before she pees on the floor again."

Will dropped his arm over the edge of his chair and wiggled his fingers, drawing the dog to him. "I don't think she has to go out, I think she's hungry."

"Well I don't have anything for her." He snatched the kettle from the stove and almost poured it into the press before he realized he hadn't yet ground the beans. "Of course."

"What?"

"I said I don't have anything for her, unless she likes roasted beets and leftover panzanella." He finally met Will's eyes, only to find them narrowed in disapproval. "What?"

"You didn't give her anything to eat last night?"

"*No*, I let her go hungry because I'm a monster. Of course I fed her. She had the last three eggs and the rest of my coulommiers, I'll have you know. Not to mention the wasted oyster mushrooms she left all over the floor.”

The whirl of the coffee grinder filled the uncomfortable silence for not nearly enough time. He managed to get through dumping the grounds and adding the water before he shot another glance at his unwanted guest, who was now smirking openly at him. God help him, he would throw the man out. He really would, serial killer spree or no serial killer spree.

"What now?"

"Did you make this dog *an omelet*?"

Frederick opened his mouth, only to snap it shut as he felt his face grow uncomfortably hot. He couldn't very well feed a dog *raw* eggs, could he? And once he had started that he worried that she wouldn't eat plain eggs, so he had added the cheese just to make certain she'd want it. And the mushrooms...

He opened the cupboard above and pretended to hunt for the coffee cups that were in plain sight.

"I'm sure she appreciated it." Will’s voice practically dripped with smug amusement.

"Sorry if I don't keep dog food on the off chance that someone might leave one here in the middle of the night." He set a cup down on the counter, harder than necessary. Then, with a sigh too petulant even for him, grabbed a second. "I assume you would like some coffee, since you've made yourself at home."

"I've hardly 'made myself at home'," Will replied, "But, if you're offering."

"What time did you get back here anyway? I trust my car is still in one unscathed piece?"

Will gave the dog a final pat before she came waddling back toward Frederick. "Six thirty. And yes."

Six thirty! "If you've been down here all this time, why did I wake up with a dog on me?" As if to prove his point, she plopped down on her rear to lean heavily against his leg again.

"She seems to like you. A rare breed."

Frederick gripped the fine porcelain cup until he feared it would break, which would only lead to another scar and more of his blood. How poetic. "I see Italy did nothing to improve your sense of humor."

He expected a cutting reply, even braced for it, but Will's silence coated the room like frost. Frederick didn't really know much about what had happened in Italy. In fact, he knew nothing. "I…I didn't mean any—"

"Do you have a floppy disk reader?" Will snapped as he pulled a bunch of the old disks toward him, eyes fixed on the labels. "One made after the USB cable was invented?"

Frederick traced his fingers over the glass of the French press, the near scalding heat a welcome distraction. He could not remember a single moment in his life when he'd poked at a flame brighter than his own without eventually getting burned. It was hard not to do when almost all the flames were brighter. Why did he bother?

He cleared his throat. "I think so. Yes. I kept most of my college stuff, it's in the garage."

He pushed away from the counter, determined to ignore the fact he was fleeing his own kitchen in his own house, only to remember the damned coffee. He pressed out the grounds and poured a cup, which he pushed along the counter into Will's view. Damned if he was going to actually serve it to him.

"Here." He made it a few steps in his escape—how dignified!—before Will spoke again.

"I'm surprised you have old junk in your garage." Will made a show of looking around the room, at the bare walls and gray marble expanses. "You don't seem like the type."

Frederick bristled, for several reasons. "Crawford may consider your perceptive abilities mythical, but you are not, in fact, psychic. You know nothing about me."

Will tilted his head and gave that smug, twitching smile Frederick had grown to know so well in the hospital. "I can't argue that. I'm learning fascinating new things about you every day."

Frederick's stomach dropped. “I beg your pardon?”

“For example, the fascinating company you must keep on the weekends.” Will leaned across the table and picked up something behind one of the document boxes. He lifted both hands to display the shimmering blue words on a pink shirt. That *damn pink shirt.*

“You left something in the back seat.” Will’s placid face did nothing to cover his amusement. “Or your date did. I don't think it's quite your size.”

Frederick stalked to the table and snatched the stupid glittery thing out of his hands. “Mind your own business! And whatever you’re thinking right now, I can assure you it’s wrong. *And* inaccurate!”

Will’s only reply was that raised brow placid look of his—*smug bastard*—as Frederick made his blessed escape to the garage.

****

About twenty minutes later, Frederick returned with a beige laptop so old it was...beige. Will watched as he stretched out the power cord to a nearby socket, plugged it in, then snatched up his keys from the kitchen bowl.

“There. I don’t have a separate reader, but you can get into the disks on that. I…I have errands to run.”

Which was probably a long euphemism for *I need to get away from you*. The only reason he was even in Frederick's house, at Frederick's table, drinking Frederick's shockingly good coffee, was because the man in question had made the decision to bring all the documents there. He could have left everything at the hospital, leaving Will to slog through it all in some bland unused office with bitter cafeteria coffee and the unbalancing magnetism of Hannibal in his cell a few floors away...

Will kept his mouth shut as the laptop screen blinked on and whirled through its startup—*Windows 3.0. Christ*. The last thing he needed was for Frederick to agree with him and send him packing. Given the choice between Frederick's clinically clean house and an actual hospital, he preferred the former.

"I assume you will want to take our long-eared guest to join her friends today," Frederick griped as he stood at the other end of the table, hurriedly donning his coat in a display that struck Will as uncomfortably familiar.

At least he's not fleeing Hannibal this time.

"Her friends?"

"Won't she be happier out in Wolf Trap with the rest of your herd?"

Maggie, understanding the significance of keys and coats as almost all domestic dogs could, whined as she jumped up to place her paws on Frederick's hip. He made a huffy sound, but didn't push her away. Instead, he took both her paws in hand and gently lowered her back to the floor.

"Down. Stay down," Frederick muttered.

Will's gaze lingered on Frederick's hands, until he realized he was doing it. *Huh.* "I don't have a 'herd' anymore. I don't live in Wolf Trap."

"Oh." Frederick pulled at his cuffs, adjusting them as if he was wearing one of his suits instead of a sweater and puffy winter coat. He looked so unlike the familiar plaid suited image of Will's memory, that it was proving rather difficult to look away. Will had never put much stock in clothing, and yet the simple change felt like looking at an entirely different person, as if Frederick Chilton's estranged twin brother had entered the room.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised. Who would want to continue living in that shack of horrors after all that happened there?"

No, that's definitely Frederick..

"So why do you still live here? In this 'shack of horrors'?" Will looked around the kitchen, all too easily imagining the walls splashing with blood, the countertops coated in the kabuki gore of Hannibal's stagecraft. No doubt Hannibal had enjoyed the art gallery setting, a blank canvas on which to paint his *patsy's* demise.

Frederick muttered a response, the words almost lost in the rustle of fabric as he adjusted his scarf and jerked his head in a nod of fair well. A moment later the front door clicked shut on the sound of Maggie's clicking nails and soft words shooing her back. In that same deep, surprisingly soft voice, Will was sure he had made out part of Frederick's reluctant answer: *'...we lost enough.'*

****

Print. Real paper and ink. She didn’t give a damn how modern the world became, or how modern she considered herself, print was still the destination of success and Freddie Lounds had arrived.

She pulled a crisp copy of Tattle Crime from the conveyor belt, still warm and probably soiling her gloves with ink. Fuck it, she could afford new gloves. They were only on their fourth issue and subscriptions were up five hundred percent from last week, and newsstand circulation was growing like weeds in a K-mart parking lot. It would level out eventually, she knew that, but in a few years she would be giving every supermarket tabloid a run for their money. This wasn’t 1995. Even the unwashed masses were too sophisticated now for

dumbass stories about alligator boy or Obama's alien abduction cover-up. People wanted real stories, real events. Real blood.

"I'm tellin' ya, Freddie. Goin' black and white would getcha twenty-five, maybe thirty percent down on production cost."

She opened to the center spread, one page of which showed the brown brick of a John Hopkins dormitory, an earthy toned backdrop to the dismembered corpse hanging against it. She had ordered a black box placed over the gaping wound were the man's testicles had been. She wasn't a monster, after all.

"Not a chance. My pictures go out in color."

The crusty old printer—damn, she loved that some of his breed were still kicking—tossed up a hand. "Suit yerself. Got any inserts to add this issue? Since ya love doin' it last minute and makin' my life hell."

"Not this week, Paulie." She gave the old toad an over-the-shoulder smile. "We're going to keep at the family angle, profiles on the victims' fathers."

This story was proving to be the best sort of goldmine; someone else had already done the digging and left her the gold. The crimes of the victims' fathers were all public record and older than dirt. She didn't even have to bribe anyone to get the crime scene photos from Josh Barnell's disco era slashing spree, or Clive Morley's post WWII compulsion to gut pretty nurses in poodle skirts. If anything, there was something satisfying about removing the rose-colored glasses from the public's eyes, reminding them that monsters have always existed and the romanticized past was just as bloody and sick as anything they could blame on *nowadays.*

And stories about dead killers and their long dead victims were safe. She wasn't painting a target on anyone's back.

She already has a target on her back.

Freddie rolled up the latest issue of her life's work—her *life*—and waved it at Paulie. He tossed out a gruff 'merry Christmas' as she left the production floor and emerged into the biting December cold. No one had greater faith in Freddie's intelligence than Freddie, but she could be wrong. Just because she knew who Ellery Caven's father was didn't mean anyone else did. Hell, she doubted that grunge wannabe Lindsey even knew, since he would have had no reason to bother hunting down the birth records. If he was smart, he would have made a point not too; plausible deniability and all that.

So, there was a lunatic out there picking off serial-killers' kids. So what? As far as vigilante death missions went, it was surprising this sort of thing hadn't happened sooner. Blaming kids for the bad behavior of their parents was a human tradition a few eons in the making. Ellery Caven was just a…coincidence. With all the trouble Freddie had gone through—okay, not really that much trouble—to find the kid, it was stupid to think this current killer knew about her. It's not like any of the other victims had been hard to find. Most of them hadn't

even bothered to change their last names, for fuck's sake. No, this butchering nut didn't know anything about Ellery Caven. How could he?

'*I sure don't need wackos breaking into my office again.'*

Freddie jerked to a halt, her stacked D&G heels skidding on the winter salt. Lindsey had mentioned that his office had been broken into, that someone had gone through his files. He said that had happened after her initial article about Wiltmore…

"Fuck. *Fuck."*

As soon as she was in her car, the engine cranked and the heat blasting, she grabbed her phone and ran down the contacts to CRAWFISH. But before she could press send, Freddie—the old Freddie, the Freddie who looked out for number one—paused. If she went to Jack Crawford, the first thing he would do would be to get a protective gag order on any story mentioning Ellery Caven. She wouldn't be able to write anything. All her work, the scoop of the year, and the one thing that might, possibly, tempt Lecter into giving her an exclusive interview, would be gone.

No. Fuck that.

She didn't work her ass off and spend her own money bribing county clerks and climbing through windows just to hand the end result to Jack fucking Crawford, who had a history of getting innocent people killed anyway.

And besides, she *could* still be wrong. Maybe the break-in at Lindsey's office had nothing to do with Wiltmore. It could have just been punk kids on a dare, or junkies thinking they could find something in a vet's office to get high. Lindsey *did* say the place had been a mess. A meticulous serial killer wouldn't have torn the place up…

She buckled her seatbelt and ran through the playlist on her phone until something loud and consuming blared through the car speakers. That Ellery kid was fine. If she was on some wacko's hit list, she would have been hit already. Right?

Freddie threw the car into drive and sped off across the vacant parking lot. "Right."

****

Alana sank into the plush velvet chair and crossed her legs, careful to keep any hint of exhaustion from her face. She had spent half the morning dry heaving after spending part of the night doing more than that. The urge to place a comforting hand over her roiling belly lay buried deep, however, as she watched the attendant place a half full glass of Bâtard-Montrachet on the stainless steel work table. Once the attendant left through the cell door hidden in the side wall, and the tiny red light in the corner indicated the locks were in place, she nodded to the orderly behind her.

Hannibal seemed amused as the orderly uncuffed his hands, allowing him to slip them back through the conveniently sized holes in the Plexiglas. "Thank you, Barney."

The orderly—*Barney*—gave a placid nod and left, closing the molded 19th century doors behind him. The soft sound was only another reminder of how absurd it all was. She looked around the former reading room, now cut by a wall of Plexiglas and lighted on one side in harsh florescence, and felt like screaming. He belonged in a hole. He belonged in the same gray, dank cell where Will had festered for months.

Don't the monsters always find nice closets?

"Making nice with the staff, Hannibal?"

"Courtesy is to be met with courtesy," he said as he rounded his work table and picked up the glass. He swirled it a moment, seeming to appreciate the play of cheap florescent light on exorbitant French wine.

"Do you decide at what point that transaction begins? I can recall a few instances of your less than courteous behavior." Alana lifted her own glass and took a sip. Ginger ale.

"All of which were met with discourtesy, eventually, as they should have been. I do not pretend to be innocent, Alana."

She almost snorted, but refused to give away even that much. She couldn't. "You prefer to pretend that innocence and guilt don't exist. *Most* of the time. The rest of the time, you seem to delight in their existence."

He took another sip of wine and closed his eyes, enjoying the rare blend with a kind of sincerity that made her want to set the room on fire. There was no longer any pretending on his part, no mask, no affect of nonchalance designed to infuriate her or put her off balance. He really did enjoy the wine, he really did believe his own words about courtesy. He really did mean the sentiment when he thanked the orderlies and asked after Margot's good health.

It made it all so much worse.

"Perhaps I have not yet decided." He raised his glass as he dropped his gaze to hers. "How is your morning sickness? I do hope the ginger ale is helping."

Ah, that heightened sense of smell again. A skill he enjoyed trotting out like a disarming parlor trick. "It does. It shouldn't last much longer."

"The miracle and mystery of creation. So formulaic and predictable as to have countless books on the subject, and yet also terrifyingly unpredictable." His eyes dropped to her stomach, causing her hand to twitch with the desire to cover it.

"Do you find unpredictability terrifying?"

"No." He meant it.

"Neither do I." She didn't.

"You have motherhood firmly in your sights, Alana. A condition that is hopelessly predictable based on how common it is, and yet entirely unpredictable in each unique circumstance. Our children can be so much like us, or not at all." He set his glass down gently, using two fingers to turn the base just so. "Which do you hope for?"

Bitterness, like the sting of rotten fruit, rose up into her throat. It calcified in her veins and in her heart, slowly turning her to stone. She could feel it happening, *knew* it was happening day by day. The poison of her hatred for this man, this monster, eating her alive. And yet, there was no alternative. She could not leave his keep to another and still hope to sleep again.

You were the clever one this time, Frederick. You saved yourself.

"Are we going to have a nature versus nurture debate? You could write a piece on the subject. I hear the New England Journal of Psychology is eager to publish almost anything with the selling power of your byline."

Hannibal smiled, the merry sentiment going clear up to his eyes. "Debates on the subject I leave to the doctoral candidates, but the realities exist outside of debate. They are certainly real to the nine unfortunates our friend Jack is currently seeking justice for. The papers have not yet created a suitably vulgar name for this latest killer. Perhaps I should send a few suggestions to the editors."

Alana frowned, more than a little confused by the sudden shift in subject. She could see the latest issue of Tattle Crime on the end of his table. A rag she had no legal means to keep from him, though to do so anyway would accomplish nothing. She had more to concern herself with than Hannibal's vicarious consumption of death.

"And what would you suggest, since we're being vulgar?"

He hummed, the lights striking his eyes like cherry marbles. "The Horseman suits, don't you think?"

She did, in fact. *I hate you.* "As an allusion to biblical justice, or to drawing and quartering?"

"Both, of course. This...Horseman thinks he is purging the world of future poison, one madman's child at a time."

"Thus the debate on nature versus nurture? It would seem this one has made up his mind."

"So it would seem, yes. Tell me, Alana, do you believe Mason Verger, with his many exaggerated flaws, was entirely a product of nurture? Are we to lay his many sins sorely at the feet of his father, or does a part of you think he was always meant to be?"

The twitch in her hand won out, dropping to cover the tiny life growing inside her. Her son was not Mason Verger. He would be *nothing* like Mason Verger. She set her glass aside and drew slowly to her feet.

"Good day, Hannibal. I trust you know the consequences if that wine glass doesn't make it out of there fully intact."

He smile widened to a grin. "I remember. And please, say hello to Frederick for me. He has been a shamefully negligent host."

Alana stopped at the open door, the mag-lock buzzing at it waited to regain contact. "I'm your host, Hannibal. Just me."

Vacancy

Chapter Notes

A short chapter this time, about 2800 words.
If anyone thought I was going to make it through this fic without using at least one beloved tropey-trope, they were dead wrong! =)

"Could you repeat that?"

"*Bugs*, dude. Termites. They're smoke bombing the whole place."

Will could see that. A two-story motel wrapped in an orange and blue clown tent was hard to miss. He rubbed an exhausted hand down his grubby face, feeling the frustrated tension in his jaw like it was granite. He had been awake since eight in the morning *yesterday*. After the long drive to Quantico to retrieve his own car, then the long drive back with a judgy-faced basset hound, he just wanted to take a shower and fall asleep.

"So," Will began, fixing his eyes on a point over the twenty-something clerk's shoulder, "you thought it would be a good idea to tent a motel that still had guests in it?"

"Hey, I just work here. The owners have had this scheduled for like a month. But, eh…" The clerk squinted at the computer screen in front of him. "You weren't gonna be here anyway. See? Says here you were paid through today, but when you didn't check out before eleven I had to go pack all your stuff up before they tented over your door. Y*ou're welcome."* He pointed toward two suitcases and box of files near the office door.

Will closed his eyes as he thumped a fist—lightly—on the counter. "Fine. Is there another motel nearby?"

The clerk made an incredulous noise. "I already had to call around for the other three people who were still here, and I only found a room for one of them. Everything's booked up."

Baltimore? The slowly dying city on the sea was booked up? "I find that hard to believe."

"Yeah, well, you might find something if you want to go downtown and pay like three hundred a night at some fancy hotel." He raised both hands in a placating gesture that felt repeated but no less sincere. He was a young guy working for minimum wage, left to clean up his boss's thoughtless mess. "Look, it's three days till Christmas, and there's like four big conventions going on. Then there's all the people who stay here and take the train into New York, I…Sorry. I figured since you only paid through last night that you knew. We put a sign on the vending machines. And, I made sure to get all your stuff. I checked all the drawers."

Will deflated, though there really wasn't much temper in him anyway. He was too damn tired to be angry, and too damn aware of the clerk's wary eyes and unfair situation. He used to be better at directing that empathetic imagination of his, more like a missile than a spray of birdshot. It was too exhausting to allow when the world was filled with people, each with their own perspective and motivations. Six months ago, he wouldn't have spared this kid a second's worth of eye contact or a word past demanding a receipt.

Damn it.

He finished checking out and dragged his suitcases to the car, which was still filled with all the worldly possessions he had been taking to Louisiana before he got Jack's call. It was mostly clothes, tools, fishing gear, some books. Maggie eyed him over the pile of stuff in the back seat as he lifted the hatch-back to shove the suitcases in. She whined and shuffled around, a good impression of a toddler's *'I don't wanna!'* dance.

"Something tells me you're happy about this."

She lifted her snout, sniffing. She had been happy to go outside when he locked Frederick's door behind him, but her demeanor had changed the moment they got into the SUV. If her previous owner abandoned her on the side of the road, as Will suspected, it made sense she would be wary of cars.

Either that or she was just upset at leaving Frederick's house.

"Don't give me that look," He muttered, which earned him a renewed bounce of frustration from the front seat. He pulled out his phone and started searched through a generic travel site. He should have found one of those extended stay places to begin with, but he had resisted on the notion that planning to stay a long time meant that he would. Even after accepting Jack's call, even after knowing he planned to turn back anyway, a part of him was still fighting the idea…or passively resisting by staying in a shitty day-rate motel.

The website, which barley functioned under its suffocating layer of advertisements, popped up with three available vacancies in the area. Two were ridiculously expensive and one was over an hour drive. After he filtered for places accepting pets, the options went to exactly zero.

He had spent most of the previous night staring at a dismembered corpse, and the rest of the morning reading the psyche evaluations of a man who had used human eyeballs as an ingredient replacement for stuffed mushrooms. So why did *this* feel like the worse thing to happen to him in the past week?

Will slammed the hatch shut and sank into the driver's seat, where Maggie placed her paws on the center console and was immediately in his face.

"I know what you're thinking, and the answer is no."

She dropped a heavy, rough-padded paw on his thigh.

"No." He gave her ears a soothing rub. "Forget it."

She added the second paw, forcing him to lift seventy pounds of barrel-chested hound back into the passenger seat. She was a big dog, and still energetic despite no longer being young. She really didn't belong in a motel room, not when he was going to be gone most of the time. And until the next body dropped, or another lead panned out, his days would be spent sifting through the medical records Frederick refused to let out of his possession, so…so it only made sense…

Fuck.

He started the car and leaned back while the heater warmed up. "Fine. You win."

Maggie circled until she had her body curled on the seat and her chin rested on the center console, huffing warm breaths against his arm. In no time at all she was asleep, satisfied in her victory.

****

"Will…what did you do?"

"I called Jack."

Frederick's heart crumbled like a pillar of ash, the soot floating up to choke him. His last resort, his only resort; he should have known no one would help him. Why would they want to?

"No, no…" He raised the gun Hannibal had left with him, the horrible alien thing, but it was gone. Instead, he held a thin surgical scalpel, the blade facing backward toward himself. He looked up in time to see Will cup his hands over his and push, sinking the blade into Frederick's belly.

"You'll look guilty if you run," Will said calmly as he shoved downward, slicing through the soft tissue of Frederick's recently healed scar. Pain tore through him like shards of ice. "Jack will just follow the trail of blood."

Will pulled back and blood gushed over Frederick's slippery hands to pool on the bare wood floor. His coat and sweater were gone, his torso now bare as it had been on Gideon's table. The scar gaped open now, a hideous cavity splaying him wide like an anatomy dummy. He cried out and saw his diaphragm move.

"No, no! Please!" He scooped and pressed, his hands working over his middle in panicked desperation, but no matter what he did, no matter how tightly he held, his insides slipped through his fingers.

"Chilton!" Jack stormed after him, following the trail of blood and gore in the snow. Will's house was gone, long behind him as he tried to run and clutch his middle. He fell to his knees against the embankment and curled over all he had left.

“Chilton! Put your hands up!”

“I can’t, I can’t!” His hands were jerked back, cold metal slipped around his wrists, as his insides spilled out on to the snow—

Frederick jerked awake with a cry. He rolled on to his side with one knee curled up in a half-attempt at the fetal position, a dull ache radiating from his abdomen. Beneath him, he felt the clammy cling of the sofa fabric against his sweaty back.

“Stop,” He groaned, rubbing his face into the cushion as if he could massage the thoughts away. Again, for the thousandth time, he knew he needed to see someone. Again, he cast the thought away, and focused on the ache around his scar. In the last year he had grown used to the phantom pain of dreams. Or so he thought, until he pulled his hands away from their death grip across his middle. He would have finger point bruises later.

He sat up and grabbed his watch from the ottoman. It was almost seven, pitch dark out, and he was sure it had still been light when he fell asleep. Reaching for the remote, he blinked at the TV as the next unlikely hipster couple explained their eccentric needs to a smiling realtor.

“What you’re asking for might not be the easiest find in that modest price range, but I have a few listings in mind. Let’s take a look!”

Uh-huh. The ‘modest’ price range being anything under a million in Tampa. Frederick rolled his eyes, but set the DVR to record before he turned off the TV and rose to his feet.

He hated falling asleep on the sofa. He always woke feeling overheated and grubby, but keeping his eyes open had proved a losing battle after the day he had had. Or, more honestly, the day he had inflicted on himself.

There had been no pressing errands…until he manufactured them.

The fridge and pantry were now stuffed with food he had certainly meant to buy at some point, over weeks, but had instead purchased all at once. He had lingered in a dingy waiting room for an oil change five hundred miles sooner than necessary, though his baser self did preen a little at the appreciative whistles of the mechanics. It was a rather nice car. After that, he had sat in a café nursing a cup of coffee and browsing the news on his phone until he was mildly disgusted with himself.

When he was both relieved and disappointed to find Will and his mangy stray gone, the disgust passed mild.

Frederick pulled his sweater off, sighing at the rush of cool air across his undershirt, and made his way to the kitchen. No dog nails clacked behind him, and no dark blue eyes analyzed his every tick and action like a mind-reading judge. He liked his solitude and always had, thank you very much. As if he would *want* to spend time with the dead-eyed savant who had tossed him to the wolves, who had made ‘*You’re not a killer, Frederick’* sound like an insult. Hardly.

He finished a glass of water near the sink as he looked over the paper strewn dining table. A dirty coffee cup sat on top of one of the boxes, and Will had left a scarf behind, tossed over one of the other chairs. Now that he thought about it, Will didn't exactly keep normal human hours. *Wonder if I still have that spare key—*

The sound of the doorbell gave him a start, followed immediately by a curse. If he didn't do something to address his anxiety problems soon, it was going to damage his heart. Ah, but who was he to break the old axiom? Doctors make the worst patients.

Of course it would be Will, because no one else had a reason to be there, so he wasn't surprised when he opened the door to a set of exhausted blue eyes and a head of particularly limp black hair. What did surprise him, however, was the duffle bag in his hand and the dog pulling excitedly against a makeshift leash.

"I assumed you would leave her behind when you came back," Frederick said, though it was the bag in Will's hand that held his attention more than the dog.

"Yeah, about that…" Will tilted his head in a question and Frederick stepped aside for them to come in, shutting the door. He looked dead on his feet, the dark circles under his eyes only more pronounced against his pale skin. Will drew a deep breath as if to speak, then seemed to swallow it.

"About what?" Frederick focused again on the bag. It was large, but looked mostly empty— Ah, so that was the game! If Will thought he was going to take any of those documents out of the house, he and Jack Crawford were sadly mistaken He wasn't about to lose his license for the likes of—

"I need to stay here. Just for tonight, or maybe a few days."

Something happened in Frederick's brain, like a hiccup. He blinked and repeated Will's words in his head. "You…what?"

Will dropped the leash and spoke with his eyes somewhere far over Frederick's head. "My motel couldn't extend my stay, and everything else is booked."

No. Will couldn't mean what Frederick thought he meant, because that would be too… Turnabout that perfect didn't happen in real life. "And you want to stay…here? Sleep here?"

Will dropped his bag, frustration radiating off him as he rubbed both hands across his face. "Look, I've been awake for two days and my head is killing me. I just want to get washed up and go to bed, so can I use your shower or not?"

Time came to a grinding halt. Will's hand froze across his mouth, mid-rub, as if his brain had only then caught up to his mouth and found a glaring error. Frederick stared, unable to move, until something bitter and manic welling up in him. A laugh, harsh and unexpected, tore from his throat.

"Yeah. Sure, Will. You can use my shower." Frederick turned away, back in the direction of the kitchen, if only to hide the scalding heat rising up his neck. *You…asshole. You oblivious*

ASSHOLE! “Make yourself at home!” He called over his shoulder, proud at the level of sarcasm he managed without his voice cracking. “The guest room is upstairs, first door on the left!” *I promise not to call Jack when you’re done.*

In the kitchen he waited, or hid, against the breakfast island until he heard the sound of footsteps ascending the front stairs. His legs felt weak, probably from the sheer amount of blood that had rushed to this face. He had never been good at hiding such things, not when he wasn’t in a professional setting, where his authority gave him a shield with which to hide. It would seem that perfect moments of turnabout really could happen in real life, but fate had grossly overestimated Frederick’s ability to properly take advantage of them.

Why didn’t he call Will out?

Why didn’t he gloat?

Why the hell did I let him stay?

Slow, hesitant clicks made their way around the breakfast island. The dog stopped a few feet away, glancing up at him warily. Frederick’s huffed a bitter laugh. If dogs could talk and take session notes, they would put every therapist out of business.

“So you’re back, huh?”

She took another step forward.

“Do you know what kind of awkward situation you’ve put yourself in, or do you just not care?”

She raised her head, the wariness gone.

“Do you know that anthropomorphism is considered an innate feature of human psychology, so I have no reason to feel bad about talking to you?”

She burst into the full body wiggle and hopped up. He caught her meaty paws just before they could land in the most unfortunate place.

“You really need to stop that.” He lowered her down, but she continued to shuffle around him, eyes up and roving over the kitchen surfaces. “Let me guess. You’re hungry again.”

She clearly knew that word, and since he hadn’t eaten yet anyway he headed to the fridge and pulled out the components for chicken stir-fry. He still had to watch how much protein he ate, but it was far better than it had been a year ago.

As he pulled out a cutting board and started chopping the bell pepper, he gave the dog—*Has Will even named her yet?*—a serious look. “I have no intention of scraping slobbery vegetables from the floor, so you’re just getting the chicken.”

She dropped into a sit and focused on the movement on his hands.

“And you can tell your oblivious rescuer to buy dog food tomorrow.”

Twenty minutes later, Frederick placed a bowl of sesame chicken strips on the floor, and plated half as much for himself, along with half a dozen different vegetables. He did *not* make enough for Will to have any. That would show him!

Dios mío, Frederick, you are pathetic.

Ghosts

Chapter Notes

Another moderate chapter - about 3100 words.

Will had never been one for long showers, but that night he lingered beneath the rippling waterfall coming from a weird series of spouts in the ceiling. It was fussy and just the sort of the thing he expected Frederick to have. It also felt damn good, and helped distract him from the temptation to bash his skull against the marble tiles.

What the hell was he thinking?

He hadn't been thinking, and not just because he was tired and frustrated with the lack of progress on the case. He had been *intentionally* not thinking. The mental walls he used to shut out the world, to protect himself from peering into the minds and motivations of every person he crossed, had been up in full before he even reached Frederick's driveway. When he did that, people tended to meld into faceless templates of one another, emotionally stripped. He could have been talking to Jack or Zeller or any stranger on the street for all the awareness he had had. Unfortunately, he had never been very good at wielding that particular skill in moderation.

That moment, when he had seen Frederick's eyes flash and his body go still, a crack had formed in Will's mental wall. It had lasted only a moment, but long enough to imagine the anger and betrayal, the burning rage at having the entire system and everyone involved in it turn on him. *Use* him. Frederick was not a violent man—Will had not lied about that. Frederick was no killer—but for the handful of seconds after Will's mouth had outpaced his brain, he had seriously wondered if Frederick was going to punch him.

Wonder how that would have gone...

He finally hauled himself from the shower and contemplated going straight to bed, but a bark from downstairs reminded him he had arrived with responsibilities. He started to pull on a clean pair of clothes when he heard Frederick's voice echo up from the front hallway.

"…already had chicken, you little monster. This is mine. Ice cream is not for dogs—hey!" A scrabbling of toenails and footsteps followed, along with what must have been a spoon rattling in a bowl. "Okay, fine, but if you get sick the *dog whisperer* upstairs is cleaning it up and—No, leave it in the bowl! Now you're just pushing it around everywhere!"

Will pressed his lips hard against a laugh. There was nothing funny about this. He was intruding, asking favors of the last person with any reason to grant them, and now that same person was downstairs taking care of Will's self-acquired responsibility. Still, Frederick was

doing far better than he would have expected. By now Frederick should have—Well, Will wasn't really sure what he expected.

From that first meeting at hospital more than two years ago, Will had had Frederick Chilton, M.D. pegged; arrogant, self interested, craving approval he would likely never get because his own self-loathing and envy sabotaged him at every turn. But that was Dr. Chilton, the man in the hospital, the man hoping to raise his career on the back on the so-called Chesapeake Ripper. But Frederick, the man downstairs with bed head and bare feet, the man grumbling at a dog even as he cooked her omelets and fed her ice cream...who was he?

"...come here, come here. *Qué asco!* It's all over your ears…" What followed was too soft or too far away for Will to discern.

He should go downstairs and see to Maggie, or at least cleanup after her. He should thank Frederick again for letting him stay, or at least apologize for accidentally referencing what had possibly been the worst day of his life. He *should.* Instead, he looked behind him to the king size and the sweet escape of sleep.

Coward.

He left the door cracked for Maggie to push open later, then shed the jeans he had just put on. Frederick ran a hospital for the criminally insane; he could handle one dog, and things being as they were he suspected Frederick would gladly choose Maggie's sole company over his tonight.

Will slid under the blankets and sank into what must have been half a foot of feather down. As he drifted off, his thoughts bounced around the embarrassing realization that he, an FBI profiler, had never realized Frederick Chilton spoke Spanish.

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By the time she was eight years old, Keisha Williams had already seen more than most ever would. She'd seen her Dad get shot dead by a small time pusher when he told him to take that shit to someone else's block. She'd seen her momma fall down screaming in the living room when the lawyer, that tired looking white guy in the bad suit, said the pusher knew things about bigger drug dealers, so the cops were only making him go to jail for a year. She'd seen the pill bottles all over the house, ugly orange-yellow with words too weird and long for her to pronounce at the time. Even then she'd known damn well they weren't aspirins and momma didn't just have a headache. She'd seen her momma stop going to work, stop wearing the nice skirt suits and black heels. She'd seen the house get nasty and the laundry never get done. She'd seen the looks on the faces of her teachers when she started showing up in dirty clothes and lying about why she didn't have some stupid thing they wanted her to buy for some project. She had the text books, she had paper and pencils. Wasn't that good enough to learn? Why were they always trying to make kids buy shit?

By the time she was ten, the teachers had gotten fed up with her excuses—because being able to buy papier-mâché to wrap around a balloon was so fucking important—and before she knew what was happening two more people in bad fitting suits were taking her and Simon to a different house. Different part of town, different school, different food; the lady from social services said she should be grateful, she was going to get proper care now with an ‘acceptable’ family because her mother was unfit.

Unfit. They kept saying that word.

Bitch, your suit is unfit.

The Morgans didn’t give a shit what she and Simon did with themselves so long as they were in by curfew and did the list of chores they had on the pantry door. Other kids at school had parents watching them, checking up on them, putting family tracker things on their phones because they were worried about them. Keisha didn’t want any of that, but it wasn’t like the Morgans had to be so upfront about things. They could at least pretend like they were parents, say they cared even if they didn't. Screw ‘em, anyway. She’d had a mom and dad, and they had been great before she found out the cops cared more about weed than murder. Not even coke or heroin, just goddamn *weed*.

She didn’t want new parents, didn’t need new parents, and Ellery felt the same way. Maybe that was why she liked that weird girl so much.

“How the hell’d you get these tickets, anyway? It’s not like you have any money.” Keisha pulled the fleece blanket further up around her neck and adjusted her legs.

They were sitting on one of those thick grey blankets movers used to wrap up furniture. The amphitheater had been cleared of snow, and rows of plywood and blankets had been laid down. When Ellery said her big surprise was going to be *outside*, Keisha figured one of those chemicals she worked with had finally seeped into her brain, but it wasn’t all that bad. Between the stage lights and the tall gas heaters they had set up, it was only a little cold. A part of her twitched at the dumbass wasteful idea of actually heating the outside, but whatever. Plus, it was kind of cool sitting curled up with a blanket instead of straight in a red velvet chair that was too tall for her short legs. The Nutcracker had been amazing, yeah, but she wouldn’t want to do it every weekend.

“The one playing young Scrooge is in my Latin class.”

“And he just gave you the tickets?” Keisha looked around at all the magazine-ad faces, people with nice figures and good teeth, smiling under plaid blankets with whicker picnic baskets in front of them. *Jesus, those are actually a thing?* “This doesn’t look cheap.”

Ellery turned the page of the program she held. "They were worth two calculus assignments, apparently."

"*What?* Girl, you doing schoolwork on the side?" Keisha jostled her in the shoulder, impressed. People do what they gotta do. "Don't tell me you selling papers too."

"I am not doing anything 'on the side.'" Ellery rolled her eyes, but that smirk said she was still proud of the score. Damn right. "I just wanted these so we would have something to do. The Christmas Eve show would have been better, but he couldn't get them for that night."

Oh, yeah. Christmas. Keisha had given up thinking there was anything special about that day years ago. But Ellery was still new to the system, and probably still thinking about her mom and how things used to be. The Morgans always gave them a present on Christmas morning, but it felt like some bullshit they were checking off a list, like something they had to do to keep the case workers off their backs.

"Simon's girl's taking him to that midnight mass thing on Christmas Eve. He said it's more like a concert with carols and everything, but I don't know about all the Catholic stuff." She picked up the paper cup of hot chocolate resting between her legs and tested the temperature. Finally. The concession stand guy had it damn near boiling.

Intermission was almost over and the last people were retaking their spots, anxious to see Ebenezer Scrooge get his ass handed to him by the last two ghosts. Just as she had done when they went to see *The Nutcracker*, Keisha watched the edges of the stage and the big curtained areas off to the sides. She'd spotted the curtain up high ripple just before Marley's Ghost had come down earlier, *and* she'd seen the stage people all dressed in black walk out and take the furniture away when everyone else was watching Scrooge in the spotlight.

Ellery laughed under her breath and sing-songed, "You're supposed to *suspend disbelief."*

"*I know,"* Keisha mocked back, watching the shadows of quick feet move under the closed curtain. "I just like knowing how it's done. Don't you ever watch the behind-the-scenes things on movies? When we get back I'll show you the one on Jurassic Park. They had dudes actually wear—"

Keisha stopped as something on the outer edge of the side-stage caught her attention, just past one of those portable heaters. No. Fucking. Way.

"Wearing what?" Ellery prompted.

"Look down there. Look! You see him?" Keisha nudged her head in the right direction, not wanting to point.

Ellery followed her gaze for a moment, then bent her head back down to her program. "See who?"

"Who? Um, try the creepy ass dude we saw in the library parking lot yesterday, and the *same guy* who was on the bus we took here. *That guy.*" Keisha took a sip of her hot chocolate and looked again over the cup's edge. Uh-huh, definitely the same guy, and Ellery might be weird as hell sometimes but she wasn't stupid.

Ellery looked in that direction again, squinting like she was trying so hard. "I don't see anyone. Maybe you're imaging things because of indigestion. Oh! He could be a 'crumb of moldy cheese. An underdone turnip.'"

Keisha stomped her foot as best she could while sitting on the ground. "Girl, don't quote that Dickens shit at me! This is serious!" She leaned in, lowering her voice to a harsh whisper. "That tweaker looking motherfucker's following us."

"He's not following you."

"Oh, right, he just happens to be hanging out near the stage entrance and looking over here like— Hold up. Did you just say he's not following *me*?"

Ellery closed her program and looked hard at the stage.

"El? You seen this guy before?" Keisha took another look. White guy, skinny, real short hair like it had been buzzed recently, and even from this far she could see the shadow of a tattoo on the side of his neck. Keisha reached into her coat and felt the pocket knife she always carried. Yeah, yeah, stereotypes were bad, but anyone who had a problem with it could write their congressman. She knew what trouble looked like, and it looked like that asshole.

Except for yesterday and tonight, she hadn't seen him before, but that wasn't saying much. When school was in, Ellery spent almost all her time on campus.

"It's not a problem," Ellery muttered. The lights fanning out over the audience died down and the scene music started to rise.

Keisha grabbed her arm under the blanket, remembering to keep her voice down. "What the fuck you mean it's not a problem? El, has this guy been following you around? How long?"

For a minute she thought Ellery wasn't going to answer her, or was going to give another line of bullshit, but she dropped her program in her lap frowned. "I'm not sure. Three months, maybe longer."

Keisha starred for a few seconds, speechless. That tends to happen when you hear something that goddamn stupid. "Why the hell haven't you said something? You need to call the cops."

"No."

"No?" Keisha ducked her head as the stage curtain opened and the audience went silent. She pulled up her blanket to muffle the conversation she was damn well going to keep having. "If this guy has been following you around that's straight up *stalking*. Do you know him?"

"No, I just started seeing him a while back. On campus, near the bus stops. Sometimes he gets on the bus, sometimes he's in a blue car. He's never said anything to me or gotten close."

"Oh like that makes it better. Uh-uh, we calling the cops as soon as we get—"

"*No*. You can't."

"And why the hell not? Look, I don't like the cops neither, but you think this guy is following you around just for the view? Pervs don't stop at the view, El. He's gonna do something."

Ellery let out a long sigh and watched the stage, like she wanted the subject to just go away. Well too damn bad! But before Keisha could fly in with argument number two, Ellery turned to her.

"If I call the cops, there will be a police report, which my caseworker will find out about. Maybe they arrest him, but likely not. And even if they do, he gets out in a day on bail. My case worker will say I can't take the bus to campus anymore because it's 'obviously not safe'. She'll tell Mrs. Morgan she has to take me to my classes, which you know she won't do. Every other day she'll have some excuse. I'll start missing classes, missing assignments, and if I don't perform perfectly so they can gloat about it at the recruitment fairs, I will lose my scholarship and then I'll have *nothing, Keish."*

Ellery pressed her lips together and faced the stage again, like she was trying to cover up the whole speech she'd just made. Damn, why was she like that? Why was she always so fucking calm?!

"So that's it? You just gonna keep keeping on like it's not a thing, like you don't have some psycho following you around?"

On stage, the Ghost of Christmas Present was sauntering around in his big robe and flinging glitter at the street urchins who couldn't see him, while Scrooge scrambled after him in his nightgown. Ellery smiled, but it faltered a second later.

"Don't worry, I have a plan. I turn sixteen on the third, and the college will let me do part-time work on campus. I'm going to get my license and buy a car, then I won't have to worry about Mrs. Morgan or the caseworker keeping me from classes."

"Okay, Miss genius. First, you won't have your license or enough money for a car right away. That's gonna take months. Second, people with cars still get stalked too, so that's not a solution. You need to tell someone." *Oh!* "Hey, what about Doc Chilton? He seems like a good guy, he's got lots of money. Maybe he can do something."

Ellery's frown finally made a dent in that calm face of hers, like she'd already had that idea before. "No, he would want me to go to the cops too."

"After what they did to him!?"

"That was the FBI, not the cops." She let out a long sigh, closing her eyes. "And I don't want to be a burden. The college doesn't pay him to be my therapist, you know. They asked him as a favor."

After that she stopped talking and turned back to the stage, shifting her whole body to make it even clearer she was done. Fuck. Keisha could practically hear the rest of everything Ellery didn't say, like *'What if Doc thinks I'm too much of a hassle and quits?'*

Keisha would never admit it, because Ellery would probably lose her cultured white shit if she did, but when the college first started making her see that shrink, and suddenly Ellery was all Doctor Chilton says this and Doctor Chilton says that, Keisha had been a little worried. Come on! Rich middle-age guy with fancy clothes and all that education, actually listening to

Ellery and making her feel better about her shit situation. Yeah, she'd had some bad thoughts about the guy at first, so sue her, but it hadn't taken long to see that wasn't the deal at all. Ellery didn't talk about that Dr. Chilton like she had a crush or she was getting a little too much attention from him. Actually, she kind of talked about him like…like people talk about their Dad.

She grabbed Ellery's arm again, earning her a frustrated sigh. "Alright, but you got to promise me if that guy gets any closer or says one damn word to you, you'll tell someone. You'll tell Doc Chilton. Okay?"

Ellery hesitated, her hands opening and closing the program in her lap, before she nodded. "Okay."

"Good."

And if you don't, I damn sure will.

Stories

Chapter Notes

> Almost a month since my last update! Rest assure that I am thoroughly ashamed of that. It's hotter than hell in this miserable swamp state (Florida) and it just sucks the life out of you. I'm convinced that brain cells just stop working after 90F in the shade and 100% humidity.
>
> Anyway, enjoy some Frederick/Will bickering and Ellery trying to do the right thing, but not quite.
>
> PS: I posted this at like 6am, but then I went in a added more to the scene between Will and Freddie (as of now, 5:18pm). So, if you've already read the chapter, you might want to back and scoop the additions =)

Monday, two days before Christmas, and Frederick was wracking his brain for where he could go and what he could do. Since Ellery's usual Wednesday session fell on Christmas day, he had rescheduled it for Monday, but that wasn't until the afternoon. So here he was, idling in his kitchen at barely eight o'clock in the morning, dreading the eventual arrival of his houseguest.

How long is he going to sleep? With his lukewarm coffee cup still in hand, he walked to the front hall and leaned around the corner to look up the staircase. During his stay at the hospital, Will had rarely slept more than five hours a day. It was standard practice to note the sleeping hours and habits of the patients, of course. Both insomnia and excessive sleep could be symptoms or exacerbators of many conditions, both physical and psychological. It wasn't as if Frederick had taken special note of Will's sleep, or the almost constant nightmares that would have him jerking awake, according to the orderlies. Perhaps that was why he was currently going on twelve hours in bed; he no longer had nightmares.

Well aren't you lucky?

Frederick looked down at his shadow, otherwise known as the dog. He really needed to ask about her name. "Go wake him up."

She gave him what he swore was a disapproving look, tail swishing lazily. Frederick had managed to fall asleep last night by himself, only to be woken some hours later by insistent whining at his door. Apparently, the dog had chosen to magnanimously share her sleeping company between the two humans in the house. How thoughtful of her.

"I give you ice cream and you won't do this one thing for me?" He took a sip of his coffee, frowned at the temperature, and turned back toward the kitchen. He pressed the grounds from

his second carafe of coffee that morning and took the whole thing to the table, where he had managed to clear a space in the dusty document mess to eat his breakfast and skim over the news.

It was this time of day, mid to late morning, when he remembered why he had bought the house after barely twenty minutes with the realtor. Sunlight pierced the wide windows at that perfect angle, cutting beams and patterns across the floor, and bouncing off the white walls until the whole space glowed a warm, muted yellow. It was nothing like the dark mouse hole apartments he had grown up in. Places with high tiny windows and rooms so small and cluttered with the accessories of life that you could barely turn around without knocking something over. It had taken years for him to unlearn the tight sideways shuffle, that particular way of moving that only people who have lived in cramped hell could truly appreciate.

He wasn't the only one to appreciate the space and warmth. The dog nosed him once, waited to be acknowledged, then returned to the large swath of sunlight she had been bathing in for the last half hour.

Maybe he should knock on Will's door, just to check. What if he was ill?

"Huh. Would serve him right." Frederick muttered as he folded the newspaper to the city section.

"Serve who?"

"Ah!" Frederick spun around. "Don't do that!"

Will raised both hands in a gesture of apology, though he did a poor job of hiding his amusement. He was already dressed in his usual assortment of jeans and wrinkled flannel. Frederick cursed the house's sound construction and thick walls. He never even heard the water running upstairs.

"I wasn't trying to ambush you." Will came around the table and took the seat he had been working from over the last two days. He stared at the blank cover of one of the files a bit too long, the tension in the air growing thicker by the second. He pulled off his glasses and set them on one of the document boxes. "I think I should apol—."

"Would you like some coffee? I'll get a cup." Frederick practically leapt from his seat before he knew what he was doing. He didn't want to hear this right now. He *couldn't*, which was almost as ridiculous as it was disappointing. The image of Will groveling with apology was one that had drifting through his daydreams countless times. It had been the subject of numerous satisfying—and wholly unrealistic—arguments he had had with himself while lingering in the shower. And now he couldn't?

He fumbled around in the cupboard for as long as he could before taking the cup back to the table and nudging the carafe in Will's direction. He stared at the newspaper, not seeing the words, and prayed Will would get the hint.

Will took the cup and carafe, but made no move to pour. So much for prayers.

“I didn’t know Hannibal had convinced Miriam Lass you were her captor. I thought if you were in custody…”

Don’t lie to me.

“…you would have been safe at least. Every law enforcement agency in the country would have been gunning for you…”

You didn’t care about that.

“You were supposed to go into custody, and once I convinced Jack that Hannibal was the Ripper, the FBI would only pretend to prosecute you. They would drag it out while we…”

You’re smarter than that.

The scrape of Will’s chair as he leaned forward caused Frederick to flinch. He hadn’t lifted his eyes from the paper. “Frederick, I am so sor—”

“Don’t!” Frederick dropped the paper and pushed back from the table, but didn’t get up. He wasn’t going to flee his kitchen again. “Just don’t. Not right now, not yet. Later.”

Will stared at him. “Later?”

Maybe he was being ridiculous, or intentionally difficult, but it was his house and his false eye and his goddamned metal plate in the back of his skull, so if he wasn’t ready to hear apologies he wasn’t going to hear them. The fact was if Will apologized in that moment it would leave Frederick with only two options. Either he would accept Will’s apology and be forced to project forgiveness he definitely did not feel, or he would reject it with the dead finality that always came with spurned apologies. He wasn’t ready to forgive, but he also wasn’t ready to say he never would.

Frederick cleared his throat and flipped over the paper again. “Yes, later. Some other time, just not…yet.”

Another heavy silence followed until Will poured his cup of coffee and opened the file before him. “I understand.”

Oh.

Maybe he did. Maybe Will had looked at him with that *thing* he did—as Frederick had once awkwardly called it—and seen what Frederick could not articulate, but which Will could read like book. How…terrifying. Wonderful and terrifying.

No wonder Hannibal is obsessed with him.

Frederick shoved the foolhardy notion from his head and reached for his phone. Will had merely ended the conversation with as much diplomacy as Frederick’s embarrassing outburst would allow, nothing more. Will did not understand him, and he sure as hell did not *see* him in any deeper meaning of the word. As if Will Graham would point that empathic imagination of his in Frederick’s direction, as if he would deem it worthy of his time. As if

Frederick would even want such a horrifying invasion, to have Will look upon all the tiny pieces of his existence and glue them together to form a picture.

He had his dignity, thank you.

He touched the notification for his email and just managed to stifle a groan at the sight of a message from the hospital's human resources manager. He read the first few sentences about holiday leave and suggestions for reduced staffing over the Christmas week before jabbing his finger on the hyperlinked phone number at the bottom.

"Dr. Chilton, hello."

"Eleanor, I got your email. I cannot approve any reductions. I made staffing very clear." Frederick shot a glance at Will, who was watching with unabashed interest. Damned nosy…

"I understand, sir, but we've always had a small reduction in staff over the holidays. I do my best to rotate the day shift on Christmas day so those with families can—"

"That's fine for the general staff, of course, but *not* the secure ward, or the…" He glanced at Will again. "Or the special ward. There are to be absolutely no security staff changes in the special ward, for any reason. If anyone makes too much of a fuss, ask those willing to cover if they will pull double shifts. They can double bill as overtime and holiday pay."

Eleanor made an impressed '*ooh'* through the phone. Her job was always easier when Frederick was willing to throw money at it.

"That solves that then. Thank you, doctor. Have a good Christmas."

Doubtful.

"You too." He ended the call and continued to swipe through his other messages, all while feeling the heat of Will's stare.

"Was that about Hannibal?"

"Isn't everything?" He sneered, glaring at the phone and wondering if he should call Alana just to confirm. Neither of them were the other's favorite person.

Will braced his hands on table. "But is there a problem? Did he try something?"

Frederick couldn't help but laugh at the idea of Hannibal *trying something,* as if he would just fiddle with the prospect of escape. If Hannibal ever made a move, he would either succeed or be killed in the process, nothing in between. Will's hard expression, however, had the bitter humor dying in his throat. He looked genuinely worried.

"No, nothing like that. It's just my staff thinking they can treat Hannibal like your common homicidal lunatic. The orderlies and guards assigned to him were specifically chosen for low susceptibility to his particular brand of manipulation and charm." He rolled his eyes hard at the last word. "It's taken care of."

Will pressed his lips together as if unsatisfied, but the tension in his shoulders dropped and he leaned back in his seat. He glanced at Frederick, his lips parting as if to say something, only to stop himself before glancing up again.

For God's sake. "If you want to ask me about him, you would be wasting your time. I don't see him."

"What do you mean you don't see him?"

Frederick narrowed his eyes. "What do *you* mean? I gave Dr. Bloom complete autonomy where he's concerned. I haven't set eyes on Hannibal since the day he was admitted. Aren't you and Dr. Bloom thick as thieves?"

"I knew Alana was involving herself, but I assumed you were…" Will cocked his head to the side, challenging. "Overseeing his therapy?"

"You *assumed* I would take every opportunity to gloat and poke him like a lab rat, you mean." Frederick swallowed, willing his bitterness back down, but it wasn't so easy. He could not forget that Will had gone to Italy on his own, that Hannibal had *surrendered* on Will's property with no official explanation as to how Will and Hannibal had even gotten there after leaving Italy. The entire thing was suspect.

You were going to let him go, weren't you?

"That is what I meant. It would fit you." Will gave a humorless smile. "I assume he's refused to be tested?"

Frederick gripped the edge of the newspaper, his face growing hot. But his anger was hard to maintain under the weight of what he could not deny. He would have gloated, would have poked Hannibal every which way to gain material for papers and further his career. He would have visited Hannibal's cell every chance he got to rub his face in his imprisonment…if only things had been different. He could see himself, the way he used to be, and knew Will was right. If life was a series of paths and choices, some little thing along the way had nudged him down a different road. Or, more accurately, sent him tumbling down the off-ramp.

Maybe it was the day he went to visit Will in the hospital and realized he couldn't take yet another rejection, no matter what the context. Maybe it was Alana, sneaking behind his back to steal his position of power over Hannibal, and making him see how toxic that position was. Or maybe it was Ellery, his only sane patient, who needed every source of stability she could get. A vengeful man in hot pursuit of fame, damn the cost, was anything but stable.

Frederick turned his coffee cup a few times, eyes fixed on the handle. "I've come to value my sanity more than my ego. But don't think too highly of me, Mr. Graham. I still take immense pleasure in the fact that Hannibal often requests to see me, and I get to refuse. There is something sinfully pleasant in being able to tell Hannibal no."

Frederick braced himself for Will's cutting reply, but when it did not come he dared to look up. Will smiled, a gentle quirk of the lips that, Frederick was stunned to realize, was not mocking or amused.

“Okay.”

Okay? He must have looked as confused as he was, for Will offered a shrug as a follow up, as if to say he couldn't elaborate. Or wouldn’t.

Well thank God for that. Frederick snapped the paper again, creating a good cover of irritability he no longer felt, and opened to the city section. It was the usual dull coverage of local politics and the continuing gentrification of the pre-war residential blocks, but his bored eyes shot wide as they came across a byline he never thought to see in the Baltimore Sun: *by Freddie Lounds, via Tattlecrime.com.*

He skimmed over the article, initially confused by its non-serial-killer subject matter—since when did Freddie write about anything else?—but two paragraphs in revealed that it was firmly set in her wheelhouse. Sensational, baseless, and focused on her favorite monster. Unbelievable! It wasn’t enough she was still trying to scrounge material on Hannibal months after his incarceration, but now she was conjuring relatives out of thin air? And a fertility clinic, really! Something almost legally impossible to prove. He had to give her credit on spinning a fine fairytale.

“Have you seen this?” Frederick sneered, unable to contain himself. He waved the paper in Will’s direction. “The Sun printed one of Freddie Lounds’ stories.”

Will shuttered his eyes like he was half asleep, the Will Graham version of exasperated. “If anyone could find a way to claw up the ladder, it would be Freddie.”

“Huh.” Frederick grumbled, already thinking of the ridiculous interview requests he would now have to field at the hospital. Every half-baked tabloid journalist would want Hannibal to *confirm or deny* this tripe. A wave of relief struck him when he remembered it wasn’t his problem. It was Alana’s.

“The continuing decline of print journalism. The Sun must be getting desperate if they’re reprinting this kind of soap-opera fiction.” Frederick took a sip of his fresh coffee, sighing at the warmth. “Mysterious unknown child indeed.”

Will snapped his head up. “What?”

Frederick waved the paper again. “I don’t keep up with Tattlecrime.com, but I can’t believe *you* would have missed this. Apparently, some fool at a fertility clinic almost twenty years ago took some samples—hey!”

Frederick huffed as Will snatched the paper from his hands. He was ready with a terse comment about Will’s appalling lack of houseguest manners, but the sudden tension in his shoulders and hard focus of his eyes kept Frederick silent. Will scanned the paper, his eyes shifting off now and then in that calculating way of his.

“I have to go.”

“What? Where?” And why was Frederick asking? It was no concern of his.

“To talk to our favorite journalist.”

“You can’t think there’s anything to this.” Frederick grabbed the paper just as Will dropped it to the table. “She’s creating fervor to get more readers, that’s all. She probably paid to have that printed.”

"*Re*printed."

"What?"

Will tugged at his coat collar, his keys already jingling in his hand. "Freddie wrote that almost a year ago, and it's being reprinted in a wide circulation paper now? I want to know why."

Frederick considered, for a moment putting himself in Freddie Lounds' self-interested shoes. If she had any kind of proof of something so explosive, she would have published it by now. Right? The fact that he had heard nothing about it supported the idea that it was just a fiction she had concocted, but why? Freddie wasn't stupid.

"Oh, very clever. She's angling to get an interview with Hannibal. It's sharp, I'll give her that. Legally, the hospital cannot refuse visitors if their purpose is related to 'family matters' or anything involving his lawyers. Discussing the existence of a child would certainly fall in that category."

Will paused as if giving the idea real consideration. "Probably. Likely, but I plan to make sure."

A sudden frantic tapping joined the jingle of Will's keys. The dog hurried around the table until she stood between Will and the path to the front door.

"I'll be back." Will gave her head a firm rubbing. "Be good, Maggie."

"Maggie? I like it." Frederick smiled before he could stop himself and recall that he was not on happy terms with Will. "I mean, I almost forgot to ask what you named her before I spent another day calling her Dog."

Will gave Maggie one last ear rub, then sidestepped her weak attempt to block him. He looked at Frederick. “I’ll be back later.”

Oh, good for you, dear. Frederick was tempted to make a sarcastic comment about not waiting up, only to stop himself when the notion, sarcastic or not, left him feeling strangely unbalanced.

“Yeah.” He shrugged dismissively.

Will started to leave again, but turned back. “If I get caught up with Jack, I might not be back until late. Can you leave the garage door unlocked or something?”

Oh! He’d almost forgotten. Frederick rose and went to the dish on the counter where little odds and ends seemed to migrate, and sifted through the miscellany until he found the spare

key. But before he turned around, he hesitated. Did he want Will 'Questionable Judgment' Graham to have a key to his house? Not really, but neither did he want to sleep in a house with unlocked doors, or be woken up at some ungodly hour to let in his houseguest.

And he'll be tired if he gets back late, and probably cold…

With a sigh, he turned around and presented the key.

"Here. It's just for the front door, though. When your lovely colleagues changed the locks, they didn't bother to use a master set for all the doors."

Will stared at the key for a beat too long, giving Frederick the nauseous feeling that he might actually reject it.

"Thanks." Will took the key with a professional sort of nod, which seemed a bit strange, and shoved it in his coat pocket before heading out.

Maggie pursued him to the door, her full body wiggle of worry suddenly reminding Frederick of his day's schedule.

"Wait! I have appointments today." Frederick followed him into the front hall. "What am I supposed to do with her?"

Will stood in the open door, shifting his legs to block Maggie's exit. "You don't have to do anything. Just leave her in here."

"Yes, that worked so well last time when she made a meal of one of my books."

Will was already pulling the door shut behind him. "Just remember to close your bedroom door then." With that, he was gone.

"I have books in other rooms," Frederick said, glaring at the closed door. Seeing that she still had one human at her disposal, Maggie gave up her whining examination of the front door and turned to him.

"You will destroy this place if I leave you alone, won't you?"

Maggie stared up at him, her frantic tail calming to a more peaceful swish. If he didn't know it was insane, he would swear the look on her face said '*ha-ha, yeah, I will.'*

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"No! No, you are not listing to me. This is copyright infringement, do you understand? I will sue your paper until you're selling ad space to escort services to pay your bills! I—" Freddie appeared to listen to the caller as she hugged her phone against her shoulder and finally

hoisted herself from her car, where she had been sitting with the door open for the past five minutes.

Will watched from his place under the motel stairs, easily hearing everything in the echo of the courtyard parking lot. For someone who pursued stories about serial killers for a living, Freddie was surprisingly easy to find. The syndication editor at the *Baltimore Sun* had given him not only her phone number, but the address to her motel as well. The email address he had given him, however, was not Freddie's. It was close, off by only two letters and a .org instead of a .com, which piqued Will's suspicions. It also put Freddie's current phone rant into context.

"Listen to me very carefully," Freddie continued, enunciating like she was speaking to a child. "No one at your paper spoke to me or contacted me in any way. I did *not* give permission for my article to be reprinted, and I sure as hell did not solicit for it to be reprinted. Whoever you think you were doing business with, it *wasn't me*!" She slammed the car door, catching the hem of her coat and causing her to growl in frustration as she fumbled to unlock the door again.

Will smirked, imagining a frustrated cat as it struggled to escape an old McDonald's ball pit. Outlandish, but just about right.

Freddie ended the call with a terse threat about hearing from her lawyer, before she managed to free her coat and slam the door again. "Pricks."

Will emerged from his place under the stairs and waited. She froze, a quick flash of fear filling her eyes so briefly that he was genuinely impressed with her ability to cover. A half second later and one would swear she was nothing but curiously surprised.

"Why, Will Graham." She tilted her head. "Come to give me an exclusive? Or maybe you have some insights on The Horseman that my readers would like to hear."

Will frowned. "Horseman?"

"Perfect, don't you think?" She slipped her hands into her pockets, shrugging against the cold. "The suggestion of biblical justice he's using is hardly subtle, even if it is insane."

"The horsemen in the bible aren't exacting generational revenge."

"Close enough. I can't take credit for it anyway. An anonymous suggestion from a reader, which I'm happy to take. So..." She took a half step forward. "What can I do for you, Will?"

"You can tell me about Wiltmore Fertility Clinics."

Freddie made a tisking sound. "I've no doubt you can read. It's all there."

"And in the *Baltimore Sun* too?"

At that, her faux pleasant smile slipped. "Just a little...journalistic misunderstanding there. Hardly worthy of the FBI—Oh. I mean, Special Investigator."

Will did his best to keep his thoughts off his face, which was definitely for the best. Considering Frederick's words from earlier that morning, part of him was convinced that the entire story was nothing more than an elaborate means for Freddie to get an audience with Hannibal. The fact that it was built around a confirmed story about Wiltmore could just mean she was thorough. And yet, he could not ignore the broader picture. Her story, fiction or not, predated the first murder by almost two months.

Will was beginning to wonder things, *suspect* things that he could not yet bring to Jack. He could hardly bring them to himself.

"I don't know, Freddie. I think someone going through the trouble to impersonate you well enough to get a major newspaper to reprint your article about a serial killer's supposed child is definitely worthy of my attention."

"Considering that you're currently hunting a killer of killers' children?" She smirked, seeming to enjoy the awkward wordplay.

"Yeah. Considering that."

"I admit, there is something appealing in the idea that the stories could be related. Perfect puzzle pieces, and all that. But I am not responsible for fanciful connections that others might make from my work. " She shifted her weight, he broadening smile shining like the poker tell it was. Will wondered if she was aware of the flaw.

"No connection?"

"I read a story last year about a fraud involving a fertility clinic and the male staff at Baltimore General, which all happened to take place while Dr. Lecter was working there. I asked some intriguing questions. Nothing more."

"Nothing more," he repeated, the knot in his stomach growing by the second. Of course she was lying, but in what way? Was she lying to protect the integrity of the story she needed to gain access to Hannibal? Or was she lying because she had evidence to bolster those 'intriguing questions?'

Either way, someone had taken Freddie's article and made damn sure it would reach a wider audience, and Will had a sick feeling her knew who and why.

"Do you realize you might have set this guy off? You wrote that story two months before the first victim was taken. You've graduated from obstruction to inspiration."

Her false smile was thoroughly gone now. "If that's true, which I doubt, it wouldn't be the first time I published a story that ended up getting someone killed. In fact, the last time I did that, it was to lure the Ripper out of retirement, under Jack Crawford's explicit direction. He didn't seem too concerned about collateral damage at the time."

Will closed his eyes, tamping down a sudden wave of frustration. And fear. If by some monstrous turn of universal luck, it turned out that Hannibal really did have a child, it would mean that the circus, once again, was revolving around Hannibal. It had taken months for him

to shunt Hannibal out of his every waking thought, and yet now he found himself hearing Frederick's voice, of all people, from earlier that morning: Is this about Hannibal? *'Isn't everything?'*

Will walked forward until Freddie looked genuinely concerned. The time for clever wordplay was over. "If that story is true, if you have any evidence backing it up, you need to tell me now."

"I don't need to tell you any—"

"I think the...huh. The *Horseman* tricked the Sun into reprinting that article, which means you're in this. For all you know, he could think the story you wrote is true, and he's killing people while he conducts a futile attempt to find Hannibal's fictional kid."

Freddie shifted her weight again. "Look, the...The story didn't go anywhere. I wrote a bunch of questions, and when I dug deeper I didn't find any answers. Okay? Why do you think I never published a follow up? If I had any kind of proof there was a little Lecter running around, you think I wouldn't have published a dozen stories on that already?"

Will watched her carefully. She was shifting her eyes around the parking lot, fidgeting in a way that would have screamed dishonesty in most people. But Freddie could look a man in the eye and say water wasn't wet, so even if she was lying there was still something else bothering her. Guilt, perhaps? He almost laughed at the thought.

“Desperation doesn’t look good on you, Freddie. You must have been counting on all those books sales before Frederick bailed on you.” Will felt the realization of the words even as he spoke them, as if the idea had not actually occurred to him before coming out of his mouth. He had expected a lot of things from Frederick over the last few months, almost none of which had come to pass. No books, no lectures, no pompous TV interviews. No airing of Will’s inner workings for his own benefit.

He felt the sting of his almost apology that morning like a fresh wound. *Should* had become *want*. He wanted to apologize to Frederick.

Freddie scoffed. “Oh, he bailed all right. Have to give him credit, he’s smarter than I thought. No need to share royalties when it’s just your name on the cover.”

Will glared at her. “What?”

She tilted her head now, that knowing smile back in force. “You *were* tested during your unfortunate stay under Dr. Chilton’s care, weren’t you? Let me guess; personality inventory? The Minnesota multiphasic? How about the Paulhus deception scales? Oh, Chilton has all the primary source material he could want. He doesn’t need me.”

A heavy weight seemed to drop against the pit of Will’s stomach, dragging him down. It would be a cold day in hell when he took Freddie Lounds’ unconfirmed word for something, but combined with what he already knew it was hard to ignore. Frederick wouldn’t need her help at all if he wanted to publish. In fact, she would only hinder his efforts to dress

everything up in high minded psychology. Frederick wanted approval in the psychiatric community, while Freddie wanted money and the admiration of tabloid blowhards.

‘You will be the first and last word in the mind of Will Graham.’

"Are we done here?" She snapped, pulling out her phone. "Or have you changed you mind about that interview?"

Will didn’t bother with a reply as he stormed off to his car, his fists clenched hard in his pockets.

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Frederick tucked his folio under one arm and shifted his coffee cup to the same hand with the leash.

"Be good, don't pull," he begged as he reached for the door knob and turned. As fast as he could, he shifted his cup back into his free hand and shunted the door open with one hip. At the same time, Maggie made a break for it.

"I was starting to think you weren't—Ooh!" Ellery set her sketch pad aside and leaned down as Maggie reached her.

"Maggie, don't jump," Frederick chastised, then rolled his eyes at himself for the effort. Who was he kidding? "Sorry for being late."

"You brought a dog, so all's forgiven," Ellery quipped as she patted the sofa and Maggie leapt up. Or scrambled up. She wasn't the most athletic thing on four legs. She completed her Olympic display with a head-first dive into Ellery's lap.

Frederick dropped himself into the armchair opposite, stifling a groan of relief as he did. It would seem his sporadic bouts of yoga and physical therapy hadn't done much to prepare him as a counter pull for seventy pounds of enthusiastic dog. It was more than a little alarming. His physical strength in general had been on a bumpy decline every since his nightmare with Gideon.

"You aren't allergic, are you? It didn't occur to me to ask."

"Nope." Ellery flopped one of Maggie's ears over her eye, then smiled when Maggie rolled to make it flop back. "You picked a good one. I like hounds."

"I didn't. She's a stray who found her way to my trash cans."

Ellery looked up, suddenly beaming with a smile he had never seen before. "Oh? So you rescued her? Even better."

"I di..." The correction died on his lips as something warm pulled in his chest. Almost a year of therapy, and less than thirty seconds with a dog had her smiling with open joy. It didn't hurt that part of that smile was directed at him in approval.

"Yes, well, I wasn't sure she could be left alone without tearing the house apart, so I hope she isn't too much of a distraction."

"She won't be. You'll just have to divide your time between two patients." She lifted Maggie out of her lap and onto the cushion next to her. "Maggie, let's discuss your parents."

Frederick made a disgruntled noise. "Still as funny as ever."

"Shush, Doc. You're interrupting." She leaned in close, utterly stoic as Maggie gave her cheek a lick, then turned back to Frederick. "There's a lot to work on here. She says her mom was a bitch."

Had he been drinking his coffee, he would have sputtered it across the carpet. Small mercies. In any case, Frederick rolled his eyes, aiming for exasperated rather than amused. "I can address Maggie's family problems during her own session. This time is yours. How was the rest of your weekend?"

Ellery continued to pet Maggie as she described the outdoor production of *A Christmas Carol* she had attended. He was less than impressed when she revealed her method for acquiring the tickets, but then she presented a sound argument against universities forcing arts students to take upper level math courses, which was impressive. Still wrong, but impressive.

"If you ever got caught doing that, you would be expelled."

"I don't plan on making a habit of it," she assured him.

He accepted the answer, but she had that mischievous smirk going again. Clearly he would have to broach this subject again in the future. Now came the part he wasn't looking forward to, but which he would be remiss to avoid.

"Let's move on to what happened recently on campus. I assume you know about it."

Ellery nodded, still rubbing absently at Maggie, who was now sound asleep against her lap. "The body they found near Ramsen Hall. The university sent out a mass text, but I saw it on the news anyway."

"Ramsen Hall is where the chemistry department is housed, yes? How do you feel about that?" He expected a dismissive response, as he always did when he made a direct inquiry about her feelings, but he was surprised when she frowned and directed her attention to the tips of Maggie's ears.

"He did it on purpose, right? The murderer? On the news they said the man they found was 'displayed'." She looked up, her brow etched in contemplation. "So it's not like someone got mugged or shot during an argument and it just happened to be there. Someone killed a person and then brought them on campus to be found."

Usually Frederick found himself wishing his patients had a better grasp on reality, but in this case he found himself regretting Ellery's keen perceptions, for her sake. "Yes. I don't know if you're aware of this, but the FBI is currently tracking a series of murders, and the most recent one found on campus is part of that."

"So, a serial killer?"

"Yes, but I want you know that he may be intentionally taunting the police by making sure his victims are found, so this recent victim on campus is probably nothing more than a further attempt to get media attention. It probably has nothing to do with the campus specifically. It's just a well trafficked area in a place with name recognition."

She smiled briefly. "Are you trying to make me feel better, Doc?"

"Yes."

"Thanks." She let out a sigh. "I'm not upset, if that's what you're worried about. I mean, there's nothing good about it, but I'm not running between classes in fear, if that's what you're thinking."

"Oh, of course not," he said primly, matching her smirk. "I would never insult you by implying you had a reasonable response to a heinous crime taking place ten yards from where you spend almost all of your time."

She pressed a theatrical hand to her chest. "Are you trying to make me feel worse now?"

"Yes."

"Thanks."

He chuckled as he finished the sugary dregs of his coffee. A quick glance at his notes from their last session reminded him that he wanted to once again broach the subject of Ellery's foster parents, the Morgans, but Ellery appeared to have other things on her mind.

"What do you know about stalking laws?"

"Stalking? What do you mean?"

"I mean, legally what does someone have to do to be considered stalking? Before you can tell the police?"

Frederick's back went stiff in impulse, a cold alertness suddenly prickling his skin. He forced himself to be rational, though. Ellery was intelligent and curious. It wouldn't be the first hypothetical discussion they had.

"Well, I'm not a lawyer, but as I understand it the legal definition has to do with unwanted pursuit, usually with contact. So, constant phone calls, letters, text messaging. Intrusive behavior on social media. That sort of thing."

"But what if there's no talking, if they're just following you?"

Okay, hypotheticals be damned. "Ellery, is someone following you?"

"No," She said quickly, but when Frederick only raised his brow, she continued, "It's Keisha. She told me she thinks someone is following her."

He almost slumped with relief, surprised at the intensity of it. But the feeling only lasted as long as it took him to consider that if she was being stalked, she wouldn't want to tell anyone. Ellery, who valued what little bits of adult independence she had, and might very well ignore her own safety to keep hold of them. Ellery, who was currently avoiding eye contact with him.

"Okay," he said, nodding as if he believed her. "What did Keisha say? Does she know this person?"

"No, she's never seen him before. Then a few months ago she started seeing him everywhere." She had no trouble making eye contact with him now. "At school, at the library, he even gets on the public bus when she does sometimes. And he...she said she saw him on train to New York. He as in the car behind ours."

Frederick remembered the moment instantly. Ellery turned around in her seat on the train, staring into the next car. And later, at the cafe, when she had seemed preoccupied with something in the train terminal.

Ah, querida, no.

"Ellery, this sounds serious. I think you—I think Keisha needs to tell the Morgans immediately so they can file a police report."

"But she doesn't know him. What is she supposed to tell the police? A guy she can't name happens to be showing up in the same public places near her, but he doesn't talk to her or do anything?" She leaned back in a huff, disturbing Maggie from her sleep. She started petting her head again. "I'm sure they'll make it a top priority."

"She could at least give them his description. He might be familiar to the police already."

Ellery nodded, her fingers now carding forward through the soft white fur on Maggie's chest. She thumped her tail against the stiff cushions. "Okay, I'll...I'll tell her that, but she still has to go to school every day. It's not like the Baltimore PD is going to follow around just waiting for this guy to appear."

Frederick clenched his jaw, knowing and hating the fact that she was right. Stalking was hard enough to prove when the stalker was known and openly harassing the victim, let alone someone who was just following at a distance in public spaces. The police wouldn't consider the report worth the paper it was written on.

Still.

"You spend a lot of time with Keisha, right? Have you seen him?"

Ellery averted her eyes again. "Yeah, I've seen him."

"Alright. You already have my number. If you're out somewhere, with Keisha," he added, keeping up their mutual farce, "and you see this man and feel unsafe, or you think he might follow you home, I want you to know you can call me at any time of day and I will come get you. Yes?" Mental alarms sounded in his head, along with warning signs flashing *Doctor-Patient Boundaries!* He ignored it all. "Do you understand. I would prefer, of course, that you call the police, but if Keisha is unwilling to do that, you'll let her know she can call me?"

Ellery pressed her lips together and nodded several times. "Okay, I'll tell her. Thanks, Doc." Maggie pressed her head back against Ellery's lap, exposing her chin for scratches. "Your stray looks happy, by the way. I'm not surprised."

Frederick swallowed hard, cleared his throat, and scribbled some unnecessary notes in her file.

In Print

Chapter Notes

> Ah, finally! I didn't get a change to do a final (meaning like 4th) read through on this, so prepare yourself for innocent typos =P This is another regular length chapter, about 5700 words. Enjoy.
>
> PS: I have never experienced PTSD or clinical depression, so I hope my characterizations of it are close enough to be believable. If you notice something grossly inaccurate I can correct, please let me know. -- LG

Staff pressed themselves against the walls as Alana stalked down the hall, no doubt sensing the bubbling rage under her finely tailored exterior. She could easily imagine she made quite the sight.

“If you look any harder at that paper, you’ll set it on fire,” Margot had quipped that morning over the breakfast table, the various sections of the Baltimore Sun divided between them. A paper Hannibal received in his cell every day.

Freddie Lounds. She was going to kill that ginger bitch.

She passed through the last of the section doors and nodded to the guard up ahead. He entered the code, waited for the mag lock to pop free, and pulled the carved oak door open. Alana took a steadying breath and slowed her pace. Calm, apathetic, confident; this wasn’t a problem. Freddie Lounds’ fictions were not a problem.

She entered, blinking at the stark contrast of light from Hannibal’s cell, and waited at the center of the room. She hated greeting him first.

Hannibal lay on his cot against the wall, one knee bent up and one arm cradled under his head. He held—of course—a tightly folded copy of the Sun, which he appeared to be idly skimming.

Seconds turned to minutes. *Son of a bitch.*

“Good afternoon, Hannibal.”

“Alana.” He sat up with ease, coming to his feet in a fluid motion that spoke to the calisthenics he engaged in every morning. He was still as fit as ever, and would probably remain so for a long time.

Alana swallowed against the rise in her stomach.

“I thought you might like to discuss the entertaining decline of print journalism.” She circled the chair that was always left in position for her and sat, crossing her legs.

Hannibal reached his work table and began meticulously unfolding the newspaper, smoothing it out to full open pages. “I would argue that decline in this context is debatable, though today has certainly been entertaining.”

Alana stalled, pinching the crease in the front of her trousers. Her choices for how to proceed with this problem wouldn’t be so vague if she had a grasp of what the problem actually was. The article was inflammatory, irritating, but was it ultimately a problem? What exactly was Hannibal going to do? Demand an interview with Freddie? Sic his mysteriously well paid lawyers on Wiltmore until they gave him answers? And that was only if Hannibal actually believed that gossip journalism tripe.

Do I *believe it?*

“Freddie wants to interview you,” Alana said flatly. “She’s submitted multiple requests over the last two months.”

“Miss Lounds is dogged. A rare quality that manages to be both admirable and vulgar.”

“And today’s dive into pulp fiction? Admirable or vulgar?”

Hannibal looked up from the paper, his pressed smile thoroughly amused. Alana let out a slow breath. Amusement was good, if it meant he saw Freddie’s article for the scrounging fiction it was. *And if he doesn’t?* Sweat prickled at the back of her collar.

“Miss Lounds has many flaws, not a few of which are present in her pedestrian writing style. However, it is her failure to include the obvious humor of a situation that is most unforgivable.” He made a slow tisking sound.

“She writes about murder, Hannibal.”

“A subject not without humor.”

Why didn’t Jack just shoot you? “She’s written a clever story designed to lure you into talking to her. I suppose that’s humorous enough.”

Hannibal appeared to ignore her reply as he set aside one page of the newspaper and began pressing down a meticulous tear line. “I was referring to the debacle at Baltimore General. The irony of the story is that the hospital’s lawsuit was groundless. One of my less esteemed colleagues was not enforcing the safety regulations with regard to x-rays and CT scans, and several of his subordinates paid dearly with cancer. There were no flaws in the lead vests. That is, not until he sabotaged them to hide his misdeeds. My fellow male colleagues and I were asked to provide evidence where, inevitably, none was required.”

Evidence. Now Alana did stifle a laugh. “What a hardship for all of you.”

Hannibal tipped his head slightly, as if to award her the point.

“So please, Hannibal, do tell,” Alana said, raising her brow in feigned boredom, “should I expect a call from your lawyers demanding I let Freddie Lounds in here? It might be fun listening to her lie to your face for an hour or two.”

It would not be fun. As Alana raked her eyes over the ornate expanse of Hannibal’s cell, her anxiety flushed anew. Freddie would write whole articles about Hannibal’s lavish accommodations, and Alana would have no reasonable explanation for them. She could just imagine the outrage of the press, not to mention the furor of the victims’ families if they learned how he was being kept. Any other prisoner would be taken down to the privacy room for an interview, but that wasn’t going to work in this case. If she even suggested taking Hannibal out of his cell, Frederick would tear their agreement to shreds.

Hannibal watched her, his maroon eyes boring in as if reading her thoughts. “I think not. I am not one to entertain regrets, but I do wish I had managed to bring Miss Lounds to my dinner table one last time. Vegetarians have a markedly different biochemistry than meat eaters.”

Alana stood. “Good day, Hannibal.”

“Always a pleasure, Alana.”

The worry that had festered in her all morning began to slip away as she neared the door, only to return full force when she looked back to see Hannibal carefully tearing out and preserving the article he had just dismissed.

****

If something was going to breakdown, it would happen on Christmas Eve. Alright, not exactly Christmas Eve, but seven o’clock on December 23rd amounted to the same thing in the minds of self-important electricians who were too good to fix a water heater on the outskirts of Baltimore!

At least one of them had been kind enough to surmise it was *“probably an old coil burnt out,”* and that Frederick could *“replace that in a snap, sure.”*

Frederick took a moment to breathe, tamping down his frustration as he took another long look at the alien white tank. He knew how to relight a pilot light. As a kid, he had become an expert at it, which was why he had demanded an electric water-heater the moment he had the choice.

A choice he was now regretting. The sleek white and chrome tank was rather different from the rusted out beige hulks of his childhood. Frederick scratched at his shoulder, growing increasing uncomfortable in the sweaty workout clothes he had been forced to slip on again once it became clear a shower wasn’t happening any time soon.

He pressed play on his tablet.

"The first step when dealing with any electrical appliance is to guarantee power has been shut off or disconnected." The denim shirted man on the YouTube video opened a gray power box on his wall and flipped one of the circuit breakers.

Pause.

Frederick stood before the power box, which happened to be in the same utility room as the water heater—*you're too generous, Universe*—and stared at the array of switches. If doctors were known for bad handwriting, electricians must be fluent in cuneiform. The labels, if one could call them such, were sporadic sharpie marker scribbles, often between two switches—because that was useful!—and appeared to be in acronyms or symbols. Was this the electrical version of an inside joke? An industry secret they couldn't reveal to the layman hoards?

"Water heater. You couldn't just write 'water heater'?" Frederick peered at the sharpie scribbles, which were only a few shades darker than the metal of the box, and read *WH* with a tiny doodle that could be a flower or flames. Close enough. He flipped the switch to off and looked back at the water heater.

How was he supposed to know if the power was off? *Oh, come on…*

Play.

"Now that we have that covered, we'll want to check the water heater element with our mulit-meter to make sure power has been disconnected." Mr. DIY knelt next to his water-heater with a small box that looked like a rugged version of a graphing calculator with wires sticking out of it.

Frederick stopped the video, so frustrated he felt embarrassed despite being alone. What the hell was a multi-meter, and was it a thing normal people just had lying around, like a screwdriver or a hammer? This wasn't going to work.

"I don't suppose there's any reasonable way I could blame you for this?"

Maggie lifted her head and looked wistfully back into the house, where the floor wasn't bare concrete and the central heating still worked. No doubt she was as sick of the utility room as Frederick was.

"You might be able to go three days without a shower, but I'm not." Or he would have, maybe, if he hadn't spent an hour and half doing core yoga poses and push-ups until his shirt dripped.

Frederick sighed and Googled [*how to verify power is off without a multi-meter,]* because that was what he and his medical degree had been reduced to. If all else failed, he could boil a few kettles of water on the stove and pour them into the bathtub, like a savage.

Maggie perked up, eyes fixed on the open door, before she scrabbled up the concrete steps and into the house. The sounds of footsteps and keys echoed from the front hall, followed by the front door closing a bit too hard.

He *could* ask Will for help. No doubt he had been used to fixing all manner of things around that pre-war dog kennel he had called a home. And Will would want a shower eventually too, so it wasn't like he would be asking much—

No. He could do this himself.

He listened to Will greet Maggie for a few seconds before returning to the task at hand. The letters WH, plus a little flame, obviously meant water-heater. He was going to spend the next two days frustrated and miserable if he didn't get on with this. Fast forwarding through the multi-meter nonsense, he watched as the electrician opened the hatch at the bottom of the tank and removed a long metal loop, the heating element.

Alright. He knelt beside the water heater and removed the fiberglass rectangle that served as a cover. Sure enough, there was the round base of the heating element, just like in the video, with two screws securing the exposed copper of a blue and red electrical wire to the metal. He reached for the screw-driver, prepared to get this over with.

"Stop!"

Frederick jerked, sending a twinge through his lower back and causing him to fumble down onto his elbows. The screwdriver skittered across the floor, where Will was already moving to retrieve it.

"Are you *trying* to kill me? Is that it?" Frederick practically snarled as he pushed himself back into a less humiliating position on the floor. "What is your pr—"

"That's an odd question, coming from someone who was about to electrocute himself."

Frederick made a disgusted sound as he rose to his feet. "Regardless of your low opinion, I am not, in fact, a complete idiot." He pointed triumphantly to the power box. "I shut off the power. See?"

Will looked at the power box, then stormed past Frederick to the water heater. He slapped his hand down on the top of the tank, next to a slanted grey box facing the wall. Frederick had to come around to see that it containing a single switch and two dot lights. The green and red lights were both on.

"No, you didn't. *See?*"

That couldn't be right. "No. See, the switch on the box is labeled right here. W, H, and a little flame. That's the water heater."

Will's eye flashed wide and he tilted his head, as if Frederick had just uttered stupidest words in human history. He moved back to the power box and narrowed his eyes at the markings.

"That's not a drawing of a flame. That's an arrow. It's pointing at the switch to the right." Will flipped the other switch and, much to Frederick's humiliation, the little dot lights on the grey box blinked out.

"Oh."

“Yeah, *oh*. What are you trying to do, anyway?”

“I’m *trying* to change the heating element in the water heater. It might have burnt out. Or not, something else could be wrong. I don’t know!” His humiliation was quickly spiraling into snappishness, as it so often did. “Who the hell taught that electrician how to draw an arrow? And why would they position that little box to face the wall? It’s not like anyone would have to actually *see* the thing!”

Will made an indecipherable noise as he knelt before the water heater and started removing the screws. Frederick knelt next to him.

“I can do it now. I didn’t ask for your help.” *¡Dios mío!* He sounded petulant even to himself.

“Don’t bother. You clearly have no idea what you’re doing. And if this needs to be replaced, I have to get to the hardware store before it closes.” Will paused suddenly, glancing at Frederick as he scrunched up his nose in distaste.

Oh, that is it. “Yes, I stink! We can add sense of smell to the list of Will Graham’s astonishing powers of perception. Needless to say, I would like to take a shower, which requires hot water.”

“You are getting on my nerves, Frederick.”

“Wh— *I’m* getting on your nerves?” Frederick balked as too many possible rejoinders ran through his head. Here was Will fucking Graham, a guest in his house, bringing his shedding dog and brooding attitude, helping himself to coffee and bourbon while he went through confidential psyche records that could cost Frederick his medical license. What the…how in…*Fuck!*

“I just saved you from getting electrocuted, and now I’m doing your chores.” Will finished with the last screw and yanked out the element. It was mottled in white corrosion. Will stood. “The least you could do is say thank you. ‘Thank you, Will, for saving me from needless bodily harm.’”

Something in Frederick turned cold, like ice melting in his gut. He stepped toward Will, turning his face up to the other man’s superior height. “Thank you, Will, for saving me from needless bodily harm. This time.”

For a few seconds, Will seemed not to respond. Frederick held his position, too stubborn to pull back first. But the burst of angry stupidity that spurred him was already bleeding away, leaving him nauseous.

Will's nostrils flared, and Frederick braced for something terrible. He got it.

"'Will Graham's astonishing powers of perception.' You should make that the title of your book, *Doctor*. It has a very P.T. Barnum flavor, which sounds about right for your ambitious brand of psychiatry; Greedy, shallow, and fake." Will waved the burnt out coil between them, mere inches from Frederick’s face. "Chapter ten, the FBI's poor wounded bird fixes a water heater. I'll be back in an hour."

Will left without another word, or none that Frederick could hear past the roaring in his ears. He had heard worse, and yet each word felt like a ice-pick stab specially designed for him. Seconds passed, or minutes, as his pressure grew behind his eyes and a nervous mix of hot and cold wracked him. He felt unbalanced, as if the top of his body had doubled in weight and his shaky limbs could no longer hold it up.

He was going to be sick.

Rushing up the short steps and into the house, he almost tripped over Maggie. The poor thing scrabbled out of his path with her tail curled between her legs. *Oh god!* Frederick made it to the downstairs bathroom just in time to collapse next to the toilet.

With almost nothing in his stomach so long after lunch, he dry heaved until he swore his skull would split.

This is not normal.

The thought came so calmly, like a bored observation. He had never been comfortable with confrontation, never thrived on it the way some people could, though few would know it. Over the years, he had learned to hide his sweaty palms and pounding heart with well-crafted snark and condescension. He had borne some sharp insults in the past, some less veiled than others, but never once had he reacted so…so…

This is not normal.

A wet sob broke the silence of the bathroom, startling him. He clapped a hand over his mouth and clenched his eyes shut. Perhaps it would be easier if he was having a bright moment of epiphany on the bathroom floor, but he had known for months he needed help. The dreams had gotten better only in the sense that he no longer remembered specific details each time. Still, he woke most mornings with an unaccountable sense of dread. His heart flew into overdrive at the slightest disturbance, and any sound even close to the muted creak of plastic filled his nose with the phantom scent of chloroform.

Hesitant taps reached his ears, and Frederick forced his eyes open. Maggie fidgeted in the doorway, her head down and he tail practically touching her underside.

“It’s not your fault.”

She stood still.

“You know you’re probably the only well balanced person staying in this house right now?”

Her tail slowly uncurled.

Frederick snorted a laugh, mostly at himself. He was actually happy to have an animal standing in his bathroom doorway. He patted the cold tile floor. “Okay. Come here, then.”

Maggie danced to his side with absolutely no grace, wiggling as if the motion would allow her to bore into his side. Frederick rubbed at her head, all the better to keep her tongue away

from his face, or so he told himself. He also told himself that he absolutely *did not* feel instantly better just for petting a dog.

“Do you want some eggs?” He offered, sniffling as he hoisted himself to his feet and stumbled to the sink. Maggie probably understood the tone of ‘do you want’ well enough to know it meant she was going to get something. She pranced around him as he splashed water on his face and rinsed the sour taste from his mouth. He was exhausted, and he still stank.

“Alright. Eggs, cheese, no mushrooms.” He patted his face dry on the hand towel. “I remember your order, ma’am, right this way. Unless your so-called owner bought dog food like he was supposed to.”

Frederick laughed miserably as he made his way to the kitchen, looking around for any shopping bags Will might have brought with him. Nothing. “Huh. Maybe I’ll put that in my ‘*book*’ too. Chapter Nineteen, the FBI’s oh-so-special investigator forgets to buy dogfoo—”

Frederick stopped in his tracks. He was being facetious, of course. For God’s sake, he was talking to a dog about a book that didn’t exist and never would, but… He heard Will’s voice again, calm and cold, yet undeniably angry. Too angry for what Frederick had said to him.

He shouldn’t have brought up what happened in Wolf Trap, not after Will had tried to apologize just that morning only for Frederick to shut him down. Still, in hindsight he had expected a little more than a snide comment, or maybe some further piling on about his inability to complete a simple home repair. But Will’s reaction had been vicious, festering, like he was already angry about something else.

Frederick groaned as he leaned his elbows on the kitchen counter and dropped his head in his hands. A book. Will thought he was writing a book about him. Frederick shoved himself away from the counter and pulled the refrigerator door open, causing the jars to rattle dangerously. He pulled out the eggs and cheese and practically flung them at the counter, because that was a sensible thing people did with eggs.

It had been almost five months, maybe a bit longer, since he had told Freddie Lounds where she could put her author collaboration. And Frederick’s work with the journals had been nonexistent since his hospital release. He had even ignored several requests from journal editors, something he would not have dreamed of doing a year ago. What possible reason would Will have to think he was doing something like that behind his back?

He has every reason, and you know it.

Frederick slumped, his wounded outrage deflating like a pricked balloon.

I studied him. I mocked and needled him. And when Will needed his help to regain his memories and expose Hannibal, what did Frederick do? He had used the opportunity to extort psychological tests from a man who had spent his entire career dodging psychological tests. He *was* going to write a book. He *was* going to publish papers and give lectures and make his name on the thinly veiled data he had gathered on the man who was ‘quite the topic of conversation in psychiatric circles.’

He had planned to do it all. Before.

Frederick lifted the two eggs he had managed to break out of the carton and dropped them in a bowl. He moved slowly as he performed all the little tasks, as if any quick movement might break the dam keeping his self-loathing in check. He was a good researcher, a good writer, an expert on the field of abnormal psychology, but he was a fucking rotten doctor and he always had been.

He finished whipping the eggs and poured them into the hot pan. He had done nothing to help Will when he was his patient, but perhaps there was one thing he could do now.

"I'm begging you, Maggie, don't tear the place apart. I have an errand to run and you can't go." He slid the folded omelet into a bowl, chopping it up in a few places so she wouldn't drag the whole thing out on the floor, and sprinkled on a bit more cheese.

Maggie ate happily as Frederick wrote a quick note, grabbed his keys, and slipped out through the garage.

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Will wasn't sure how long he had been standing in the plumbing aisle, staring at nothing, when an exhausted looking clerk told him they were closing in ten minutes. He barely acknowledged the monotone 'Merry Christmas' as he paid and dragged himself back out into the biting cold of the parking lot. Tossing the shopping bag into the passenger seat, he made a point not to look at himself in the rearview mirror. He had a feeling he wouldn't like what he saw.

What he did see, and had been seeing since he left the house, was the look on Frederick's face as each of his sharp words hit their intended mark. Greedy—hit. Shallow—hit. Fake—a definite hit, and the one that seemed to drain the blood from Frederick's cheeks.

And why did he do it? Because he was angry about having his past decisions thrown in his face? Because the moment he had seen that indicator light, and Frederick's hands about to touch a metal screw driver to a live wire, he had felt the floor vanish beneath him in a wave of panic he couldn't quite match to the situation? No. He had lashed out with the intent to maim because he let Freddie Lounds put a bug in his ear.

Will pulled out of the parking lot and headed back toward Frederick's exclusive, yet surprisingly rural, neighborhood. Along the way he scanned the roadside for motels, telling himself he was looking for vacancies while paying almost no attention to the neon signs. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. If he had planned to get thrown out of Frederick's house, he could have chosen a smarter time to do it. There was always Jack, he supposed…

Will cringed. He was a grown man, and Jack was his friend, but the thought still held a surreal high school quality, like asking to crash at the principal's house.

As the gaudy business signs faded off and the manicured pines of a rich Baltimore suburb began, Will tried to imagine himself apologizing. For someone who had been told, repeatedly, about his *clinically fascinating* imagination, he couldn't conjure the image. Despite the unreliability of the source, he couldn't help but think that Freddie was probably right. Frederick craved career advancement, fame, approval in the psychiatric community. It was why he had pushed Gideon, why his testimony at Will's trial had been so theatrical and damning, why he had gotten Will to take all those damn tests, and it was why he would likely use those tests to crack Will's skull open and expose it to the world in a cheap airport terminal paperback. Yes, Frederick had changed, but not that much. People didn't change that much.

Did they?

Did I?

Frederick's house was one of the last in the neighborhood, before the manicured trees turned to real woods and the road continued on into the Maryland countryside. He pulled into the drive way and instantly sat up, alert. The garage door was open and Frederick's car was gone. Will had only been staying there a few days, but leaving the garage door open didn't seem like a thing Frederick would normally do.

He darted up the steps, fumbling for the spare key in his breast pocket. The car was gone, Frederick had obviously left, and yet Will couldn't suppress his rising ball of panic. *He left because of me. He fled his home because of me.*

He opened the front door to Maggie's happy greeting.

"Frederick?" He knew he wasn't there, and yet he called anyway. Just as knew he wouldn't be in the kitchen or the music room or the den as he checked each in turn. Maggie followed at his heels, her little grunts demonstrating her frustration that he had yet to greet her properly. Reaching the small door of the utility room, he saw that the light was still on and went in. No Frederick, only a piece of legal pad paper taped to the water heater. Will snatched it away, causing the top to rip.

Had to do something. Please don't leave until I get back. – F

Will cursed through his teeth and he dug out his phone, only to drop his hand a second later. Whatever conversation—*confrontation*—they were going to have, it wasn't going to happen over the phone. Fine. Frederick could look him in the eye, or try to, as he spun his lies and justifications. What version would it be? Would he argue for the greater benefits to psychology and human knowledge as a whole, or would he give Will false assurances that the book would be couched in metaphor and avoid mentioning Will by name?

And then the argument would shift, as all arguments inevitably did, to mutual recriminations. Frederick would demand to know why, *really why,* Will called Jack that day. Apologies could wait, but explanations could not, and Will would tell him…he would tell him what he had tried to tell him that morning. That he had thought he was doing the right thing, that going into custody was safer than running, that he was trying to protect Frederick.

He would lie.

Will folded the note and shoved it in his pocket, along with his phone. If he was going to be driving the Baltimore streets in search of a motel in the next few hours, he might as well fix the damn water heater first.

“Come on. I left the replacement in the car.”

Maggie bounced around, but kept her eyes low, as if she was torn between his miserable tone and the fact he had finally acknowledged her. She shifted over completely when he knelt down to give her ears a good rub. After he replaced the heating element, he would get his things out of the guest room and into the car in preparation. Maybe Frederick deserved the satisfaction of kicking him out, nice and clean, with a slamming door and no fumbling around for suitcases.

Maggie followed him out to the car with only minimal sniffing and one shifty threat of an excited bolt down the driveway. Once back inside, he headed down the hall and through the kitchen to the utility room, but stopped halfway through. A dirty frying pan lay on the stove, next to a mixing bowl and two eggshells, both still dripping their contents onto the counter. Another bowl had been pushed up against the front of the refrigerator, a few specks of cheese and egg sticking to the sides. As far as messes went, it barely qualified, but in Frederick’s pristine home it struck Will like a fist.

Frederick is not okay.

“He made eggs for you again,” Will muttered aloud, not knowing why. As if she could understand him and appreciated the reminder, Maggie went to her bowl and made short work of the remaining specks of cheese.

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After fixing the water heater, cleaning up the kitchen, and getting his things out to the car, barely more than twenty minutes had passed. Will sat at the head of the kitchen table, his face pointed down at one of Marcus Reed’s many incident reports, but he wasn’t reading it. He was waiting, and…fretting.

He had spent more than two months keeping voluntary weekly appointments with Hannibal Lecter, and yet he was *fretting* over Frederick Chilton? Will rubbed his forehead under his curling bangs, feeling the thin scar just at the hairline. Maybe Hannibal had gotten a bit deeper with that bone saw than he realized.

Forcing himself to focus, Will turned back the page to the beginning of the file and started again. Reed spent most of his time in a dissociative state, muttering to himself and scratching out crude drawings of eyes on the walls of his cell. At one time he had been allowed paper

and soft crayons, but both had been taken away when the orderlies realized he was eating his artwork. Reed's obsession with eyes had led to several—

The low rumble of Frederick's car had him snapping his head up, following by the dull clank of the garage door coming down. Will let out a sigh and closed the file. He wasn't going to be cruel, not this time, but he wasn't going to let sympathy cloud his judgment either. Frederick could destroy what little remained of his life. In the halls of the FBI he would be a freak on full display, his ever tick and mannerism open to interpretation and instant page number reference. He really would end up fixing boat motors in Louisiana, only now he no longer wanted to.

Frederick drew to a halt as he entered the kitchen, his fingers digging white around the document box he held. He still wore the gray sweats from earlier, and no coat. His eyes were puffy and red rimmed, and his complexion was one Will had seen far too many times, usually staring up at him from the cold metal of an examiner's table.

"I didn't expect you to still be here," Frederick said, his voice strained.

"I saw your note. You told me not to leave."

Frederick looked away. "Still didn't expect it. Here." He placed the box on the table and backed away.

Will stood, slowly, for something in Frederick's manner suggested quick movements wouldn't be appreciated. "More files?"

"Your files. And surveillance footage and audio recordings. It's, eh…" Frederick fumbled with the lid and lifted out two flash drives on lanyards. "They're the only copies, there's nothing left on the hospital servers or my computer. And my session notes, from the few times you actually spoke to me, and the tests results—" Frederick broke off, and for a moment his gray face seemed to turn green. Will took a step toward him.

"This is it, everything. Your test results, I never made copies and no one else ever saw them. This, here, this…" He dug around the box, his movements turning jittery, until he produced a single piece of paper. "This is the release form you signed. That I made you sign. I don't care what you do with the rest, but I would ask that you destroy this. It's the only copy and…you should get rid of it."

Will stared at the box, knowing and yet unable to accept what he was seeing. Therein was everything Frederick needed to make his career, the proof that would back him up and make him a sought after star in the psychiatric community. Everything Dr. Frederick Chilton had always wanted.

"Why are you doing this?"

Frederick rubbed a shaking hand down his face, already half turned to make his escape. "Because I'm not writing a book about you. I'm not going to write a book about you." He swallowed hard, cringing as if the action was painful. "Look, you should…you don't have to

leave, you know. It's a big house and the files you need are here, and it just makes sense. If you want to. I don't care."

Maggie followed Frederick down the hall to the front of the house, pausing at the point where she could still see both of them. She did her nervous dog dance, looking at Will, then up at Frederick as he must he reached the stairs, willing them both to stay in one room so he could have it all. Seeing she wasn't going to get her way, she chose the next best thing and disappeared in pursuit of Frederick.

Will pulled out a chair near the open box and dropped into it. The single sheet of paper, the release form he had signed giving away his rights to the contents of his own mind, still stuck out of the top. He pulled it free and almost choked a laugh at the bad scrawl of a signature he had made that day, since Frederick was holding the clipboard for him.

He tore the sheet in half, then tore those two pieces in half, again and again, until the thickness of the little paper squares defeated him and there was nothing left with confetti.

Undead

Chapter Notes

A short chapter here, about 2K words. Ellery gets around town on her own quite well, though I think we all agree she shouldn't. Kids... ;)

Also, Green Mount Cemetery in Baltimore is an historical site and stopped taking new burials a long time ago (I'm pretty sure). Still, I couldn't resist using it for this chapter. If you're ever in Baltimore, I highly recommend visiting. It's full on Victorian gothic; weeping angels, hillside vaults, the works! I've also taken some liberties with the layout of the public mausoleum and parts of the cemetery. Hey, it's a big place, and my characters aren't marathoners.

In the nineteenth century people would come to the cemetery on Sundays after church to visit their dead relatives. They would bring picnic baskets and scopes to watch the birds, all while their kids laughed and played around the family gravestones. People would stroll in the cemetery, like it was any other type of park, and few would have suggested doing so was disrespectful or that they should only walk such places in somber silence. Death wasn't a taboo subject back then, something to be done away with as quickly as possible and then forgotten. Cemeteries, once upon a time, weren't dead places.

Reggie Babin hummed to himself, reciting the tour guide introduction to Green Mount Cemetery without moving his lips. He'd heard it enough times, with a few variations here and there, that he could rattle it off word for word, but he didn't want anyone to think he was crazy. People who worked in cemeteries had enough nonsense to deal with without people making up stories. Oh, the crazy groundskeeper talks to himself! Maybe he's talking to *ghosts*. Come on.

Although, if he was being honest, it was fun to hype up the creepy groundskeeper image during the ghost crawls and tours that were always big around October. Dr. Rogan or one of the other guides would be telling that asinine story about the cemetery founder shooting his own daughter when he mistook her for the boyfriend he disapproved of, and that her brokenhearted soul could still be seen roaming the stones, blah-blah. And then Reggie would just happen to be nearby, raking leaves or something, and Dr. Rogan would say, "Isn't that right, Reggie?", and he would hunch his shoulders like a surly old goat and growl, "I ain't talkin' 'bout it!"

The tourists loved that crazy shit.

Reggie snorted a laugh and swung his snow shovel in an arc, taking down a row of icicles. They hung like daggers from the eaves of the hillside vaults, right over the low narrow doors where the tourists couldn't resist pressing their noses, hoping to see something through the

cracks. Really, the vault roofs weren't high enough for any falling icicles to gain much speed, but management was always in a tizzy that one of the visitors would lose an eye or something. He didn't mind. During the winter there weren't any weeds to pull or lawns to mow, and work was work. Though, would it have killed the stingy bastards to give him time and a half for working Christmas Eve? Yeah, it wasn't technically a holiday, but might as well be.

He kept at it—swing, crunch, swing, crunch—when he caught movement just out of the corner of his eye. No surprise. There were always plenty of visitors, even when the weather was shit, but he peered over his shoulder, shovel raised, until he was sure it was who he thought it was. Yep. That Caven girl.

Goddamn shame.

She must have come up the other way on the cobblestone path he had finished snow-blowing an hour ago and headed straight for the same place she always went. Her visits weren't regular, but he had seen her enough in the past two years to learn a thing or two. Most mourners knelt in front the headstone with some flowers, brushed the snow away for a minutes, then left. Some spoke to their dead loved ones, though that was less common, and those who did usually pulled a quick glance around to make sure no one was watching them. Judging them.

The Caven girl didn't do any of that, at least not that Reggie had ever seen. She always came alone and just...hung out. He'd seen her reading, drawing, messing with her phone like she was now. A few times in the warmer months he'd even seen her sitting cross-legged on the grass, books open on her lap with a calculator on top like she was doing homework. For God's sake, *homework* at her mother's grave.

Jesus Christ, kid.

He remembered that funeral too. What a shit show. How does a family of rich assholes let a kid go to her mother's funeral alone? The only other person there, besides the priest, had been some child services woman. You could always spot the type; pantsuit, sensible shoes, always carrying a leather folio or a clipboard. The mom must have had some friends or coworkers, *something,* but why they hadn't been there was anyone's guess.

He'd even heard that the family had tried to keep the mother from being buried there, but apparently the plots had been willed down by a grandmother or something ages ago, so there was nothing they could do about it. Bunch of pricks.

The girl—Emily? Eleanor? No, it was something weird—spotted him as he drudged through the snow to the next vault. He was close enough that it would be rude not to acknowledge him, and sure enough she gave a small wave and lifted her chin in his direction. He waved back over his shoulder, not wanting to intrude. He was used to the tourists and the taphophiles, but real mourners were rare. Except for the family plots that still had open space, there were no new burials at Green Mount.

Sorry, folks, reservations only. We're booked.

Another swing and down came a shower of frosty potential lawsuits. How did that kid even get to the cemetery by herself so often? Probably took the bus. He doubted she lived in the shit neighborhood that surrounded the cemetery. It was Reggie's neighborhood, after all, and he would have seen her.

Finished with vault eleven, the Talbots, he stepped back and glared at an indentation in the snow that covered the small bit of roof sticking out of the hillside. Another partial collapse maybe. *Sonofabitch*. He pulled off his gloves and fumbled for his notepad. He just hoped the bodies in this one were actually in caskets. Some of those crazy Victorians put their loved ones on shelves behind a glass barrier, like they were monks being laid out in catacombs or something.

If he had to see one more sunken faced turn-of-the-century corpse while fixing a roof, so help him…

A sharp movement from the Caven gi—*Ellery, that's it*—caught his attention again. He looked just in time to see her eyes fixed across the cemetery, wide and alert, before she dropped them back to her phone. She ran her finger along the screen, up and down in a way that didn't look genuine.

Reggie knelt to pick up the shovel where he'd dropped it and looked out across the blinding expanse of snow and weathered marble. A man stood not far off, leaning against a tree near the Betsy Bonaparte tomb, as if he meant to hide behind it but was too lazy to pull it off completely. Reggie was sure he'd never seen him before, but that didn't mean anything. People came from all over. Still, he didn't look like the type to tour a graveyard. He had a hard, lean face, which wasn't improved by his buzzed haircut or the black smudge of a tattoo on the side of his neck. Even at that distance Reggie could see he wore a shiny black bubble coat with some design covering one side in gaudy gold and red.

Christ, he looked like every stereotype of a suburban wannabe thug.

Laying his shovel across his shoulder, Reggie moved to the next vault, which brought him a good ten yards closer to the Caven plot. Ellery acknowledged him again as she shifted on the low stone bench next to her mother's marker, the place she always sat. She turned full around, putting her back to Mr. Bubble Coat as if she meant to ignore him. But just as Reggie lifted his shovel to the vault eaves, she lifted her phone a bit, closer to eye level, and did that split finger thing that makes the camera zoom in.

"You ain't becoming a tourist, are you?" He chuckled. "The place grows on you."

Ellery shot him a small smile, but didn't lower her phone. She appeared to be shifted it minutely, as if trying to get the perfect angle on something.

"I do like the cemetery, but I'm not taking a picture of the stones." She tapped the bottom of her screen, and the phone chirped out a version of an old fashioned camera click. "I'm taking a picture of a guy behind me."

Reggie blinked. "Okay. Eh…why?"

She stood, grabbing her bag as she slipped the phone into her pocket. “Because he’s following me.”

What? Reggie moved forward, ready to—well, he wasn’t sure. Ask questions? Offer help? But it was too late. She was off down the hill, cutting through the shin deep snow rather than circle back to the path. It was a steep incline at this part of the cemetery, at the bottom of which lay the grand public mausoleum. She appeared to be heading right for it.

Damn kid! If she was trying to avoid some creep, the mausoleum wasn’t the place to do it. There was only one entrance, and the inside was a single square corridor going around the center vaults and right back to the entrance. A good place to corner someone. Not to mention it was in the opposite direction of the front gates. Reggie shot a look over his shoulder, cursing when he saw the guy moving swiftly down the cleared steps.

“Hey!” Reggie yelled, trying to sound as imposing as possible, but the guy ignored him. Fucking hell, he was too old for this shit, and that wasn’t a joke. Sixty might be the new fifty, but he wasn’t stupid enough to give himself odds against some upper fueled punk in his twenties.

Reggie tucked the shovel under one arm and fumbled for his phone as he started down the hill, slipping in the too high snow. *If that motherfucker so much as touches that girl…*

The guy reached the flat expanse before the mausoleum and continued with long strides, as if the dumb shit actually thought he was being stealthy. A second later, he hustled up the mausoleum steps and through the gate where Ellery had already disappeared, prompting Reggie to quicken his pace. But just as he stepped around a family marker, the back of his heel sank through the snow and caught the edge of something hard, probably one of the low little stones those *goddamned Victorians* used for dead infants. He went down, falling back harmlessly into the cushion of the snow.

He let out a nice string of curses that were sure to get him fired if anyone heard, and fumbled again with his phone. The three numbers stood ready on the little screen, but he hesitated over the call button. You didn’t live sixty years in the worst neighborhood in Baltimore without learning you never call the cops. Never. Nothing good comes from it. With his luck they would come rushing in far too late, see his snow shovel, and put a bullet in his gut.

“Fuck.”

He hoisted himself up, prepared to make the damned call, but stopped. Ellery emerged from the mausoleum, her movements swift and close to the wall as she slipped to the side where the wrought iron gate stood open. She unhooked the hold chain, pulled the gate shut, and swung down the long old fashioned latch, which so happened to have a catch on top.

It wasn’t locked, technically, but no one inside was getting out on their own.

Reggie belted a laugh, the sound erupting from him before he could think better of it. Then, once he started, he saw no reason to stop. She must have circled around the center vaults inside just as he came in, like two people chasing each other around a tree.

Ellery smiled his way and gave a little mock military salute as she strode down the mausoleum steps in the direction of the front entrance. She didn't even look like she was in a hurry.

The crash and rattle of two century old wrought iron echoed across the stones. A livid pasty face pressed against the black bars. "What the fuck! You little bitch!" He stretched an arm out through the bars above the close ironwork, but it was almost chin level and there was no reaching the two foot long latch against the marble wall.

Reggie continued to laugh as he shuffled down the hill and pressed send on his phone. He would head for the front office and wait for the cops there, just to be safe. Damned if he was going to be the one to open that gate.

Christmas Eve

Chapter Notes

Meanwhile, in another part of Baltimore that was not a graveyard... ;)

It was midmorning by the time Frederick woke. The sharp ray of sunlight piercing his east window had reached the foot of his bed, warming his toes…and his chest. And back.

Christ, it was hot.

He flung the duvet aside, kicking at the sheets and heat that seemed to cling to him in a sticky fog. He kept the upstairs thermostat on seventy in the winter. It had always been his preferred way to sleep, curled up under thick blankets in a room that was just a bit too cold. No doubt Will had been meddling with things, damn him.

But as Frederick sat up and moaned through the telltale mixture of shaky limbs and pounding head, he realized the thermostat had nothing to do with it.

“Ugh.” The room was so thick and close, he might as well have been swimming through it as he made his way to the bathroom. His body ached, even his good eye ached, and the back of his throat felt like it had been through a sandstorm.

Of course he had gone out into the freezing cold last night when he was exhausted and hungry, still wearing his damp workout sweats. If memory served, he’d been in too much of a guilt ridden hurry to remember his coat either. Fantastic. He might as well have injected the flu virus directly into his veins.

After fifteen minutes under a near scalding shower, he felt somewhat better. The continued rumble in his stomach was a good sign, suggesting he probably had a mild cold rather than the flu. He tossed on a pair of blue sweats and ruffled his damp hair, ready to ransack the kitchen for his full daily allowance of protein, when he passed the standing mirror in the corner and scowled.

He looked like freshly showered death.

Figures. Some people could get sick and still look good. *Some* people could pound on death’s door and still be beauty personified. And some of those people were probably downstairs right now, sitting at his kitchen table.

Twenty minutes later Frederick stood fully dressed in dark gray slacks and a burgundy cashmere sweater over one of his dress shirts, though he had forgone the tie on second thought. It wasn’t much of an improvement. With his hair styled, face shaved, and bullet scar

artfully subdued under a layer of expensive custom tinted concealer, he headed downstairs to face the music.

Oh, there was definitely going to be music. He didn't expect the events of last night were at an end. It hadn't been until he was curled under the blankets, his exhaustion battling with his nerves, that Frederick truly realized what he had done. Giving Will all his records and psyche results had felt right, even necessary, but in addition to Will's records Frederick had also thoughtlessly handed over his session notes. Every awful, ignorant, and inevitably inaccurate thing he had written about Will during his short time in the hospital, page after page of his neat script on glaring yellow legal paper, was in that box. And some of the things he had written, especially the potential theories explaining Will's obsession with Hannibal, had been…*Fuck.*

There's a reason they say projection is a psychiatrist's worst enemy.

He moved slowly down the stairs, peering over the railing as he waited for the inevitably morning greeting of fur, but he heard nothing. His stomach gave a sickening lurch, and not from hunger. They were gone. Of course they were gone. Will had probably stormed from the house late last night after reading Frederick's notes, and who could blame him? He should be lucky Will hadn't strangled him in his sleep.

Frederick shuffled into the kitchen, hoping a full stomach would make him feel better. Good riddance anyway. No more interfering houseguest, no more clumsy mongrel shedding all over his bed. He could spend the day as he always spent Christmas Eve—working.

Although, that wasn't necessarily true. In the past he had spent his Christmas Eves at parties, usually given by various high flying members of the Baltimore elite. He had always been proud of attending such gatherings, assured by his ability to wrangle an invitation that he had made it, that he was somebody. At the time, it hadn't occurred to him that people shouldn't have to *wrangle* invitations to parties. He always had.

Frederick rubbed a shaky hand over his face, cringing when he felt the powdery smooth slide of the makeup over his scar. What a waste of time that had been. What a waste *all of it* had been. As if Will Graham of all people would care what the hell he looked like. As if anyone in Baltimore had ever invited him to a party for any reason other than to fill out their guest list with doctors.

Well, seeing as how he was alone, again, he would start a new Christmas Eve tradition. Work. He still had half a dozen yearly psyche reviews to type up, not to mention a handful of interview requests he had yet to formally reject. Other people didn't need him, so he sure as hell didn't need other people! A full day indeed.

Frederick opened the refrigerator and stared into the overstocked mass, his shoulders slumping. It was becoming more difficult to believe his own lies.

He pulled out the eggs and set to cracking them in a bowl, whipping them hard with a heavy sprinkling of cheese. There was a small package of Canadian bacon he could have too, now that Maggie wasn't going to be eating it. Why shouldn't he have four days' worth of protein in one sitting? He already felt like shit, and what was he saving himself for?

Every goal he'd ever had was now either an unachievable fantasy, or came at too high a price. Fame, awards, professional admiration? His value to the psychological community extended no further than his proximity to Hannibal, a subject he refused to talk or write about. And as for personal goals—friends, family, a partner? Fantasies. Stupid, half slumbering fantasies best suited for those few waking minutes each morning when he could pretend to open his eyes and see someone lying next to him, someone who wanted to be there and wanted him. If being a forty-two year old workaholic with a sour attitude had made that unlikely before, his milky dead eye and livid scars made it a certainty now. Maybe he would have all the damn bacon, and the rest of the cheese too. How many porter house steaks would it take to send him into irreversible renal failure? If he was lucky, he could be dead by New Year's—

The bowl clattered to the kitchen counter, splashing egg over the side. Frederick stared at the mess, his hands shaking. It wasn't the first time he had conjured up thoughts of ending himself, but those times had been little more than internal tantrums, moments of bitter petulance with no real intent. Never before had the flash of the idea given him such…relief. A small bubble of joy and expectation, like suddenly finding the simple solution to a long vexing problem, swelled around him as he realized he…he *could* do it. It would be easy. It would be freeing. Every worry he had, every fear for the future, gone.

And that feeling, as any trained psychiatrist could tell you, marked intent.

Frederick snatched up the bowl of eggs and moved to dump it down the garbage disposal. *Dios ayúdame…fuck. Fuck!* He was going to get help, that's what he would do, just like he would recommend to any one of his patients. What if one of them had said they felt relieved by the prospect of death? What if one— What if *Ellery* said something like that to him?

He cursed, the sound coming out in a painful rasp. The pressure in his sinuses grew until he was completely stuffed up, and his eyes went puffy and raw. He sniffed and rubbed at his eyes, soaking up the tears in his shirt cuff before they could fall. Damn it, he *was* getting sick. Did he even have any throat lozenges—

A sudden scraping sound sent Frederick's heart into his throat. He spun away from the sink just in time to see Will step through the sliding door leading to the pool deck. Maggie moved around him, trying to get in first despite Will's firm grip on the leash. He was bundled up for the cold, a beanie hat pulled low over his ears. Fresh snowfall still clung to both of them.

They had been out walking. Just walking.

"I thought you left," Frederick gasped, cringing at the waver in his voice. How long had Will be standing at that door? How much did he see?

Will closed the door and unhooked Maggie's leash. She made her way straight for Frederick's legs.

"No," Will said, his eyes narrowing as they roved over the kitchen and Frederick. "I needed some air."

He felt his face heat further, if such a thing were possible, and set the bowl of eggs back on the counter. "Ah. Okay. I was just…" He looked at the counter covered in things he had no

business eating. “Just making eggs again for the dog. You still haven’t gotten dog food, by the way.”

Will pulled off his beanie hat, leaving his black curls magnificently tousled—*really?*—and stopped at the end of the counter. “I did.” He looked pointedly behind Frederick to the short counter under the cork board, where a bright yellow bag of dog food and several cans sat in plain sight.

Oh. Frederick cleared his throat, wincing at the sting. “Oh.”

Will pulled off his gloves and shoved them into the hat as he took a few steps closer, his attention once again on the array of foodstuffs. “If you thought we were gone, why would you be making eggs for the dog?”

Shit. Frederick retrieved a dish towel to mop up the spilled egg which was probably the most transparent stalling method he could have chosen. Will continued to watch him, waiting.

“What I *meant* was that I started making eggs for the dog before I realized…before I thought you had both left, so now I’m just making breakfast for myself.” Frederick gave a derisive sniff, or tried to. The fact he could no longer breathe through his nose rather ruined the effect. “Does that answer your probing question, *special investigator*?”

Will raised his brow and came closer, reaching to flip over the packet of bacon. “Isn’t this a lot of protein for someone in your condition, *Doctor?*”

Frederick cradled the scooped up eggs in the towel and hurried to the sink where to he could turn his back to those damn penetrating eyes. Will didn’t even have to stare. A glance, a sleepy sideways look over someone was all he ever needed, as if Frederick’s skin were made of glass.

“My dietary issues are my own business, *thank you*.” He wrung out the soaking towel like he was trying to throttle it.

Will made a noncommittal sound, and Frederick hoped that was the end of it, but he wasn’t done. “They are. So is whether or not you intend to live much longer.”

Frederick dropped the towel with a wet slap, his shoulders hunching before he could stop the reflex. He sniffed again, this time feeling the humiliating tickle of a soon-to-be runny nose, and turned around. He didn’t need this shit right now.

“Don’t worry yourself, Will. If I do plan to put an end to this farce, I’ll be sure to do it when you’re out of the house and have a solid alibi. Even you don’t deserve *three* false murder allegations in one lifetime.”

“Is that a joke—”

“Though it’s too bad I wouldn’t be able to pull it off in some way that looked like an accident.” Frederick gave a humorless laugh and pulled a pan down from the cupboard. “Pity.

After years of paying life insurance premiums, someone should get something out of my death—"

"I asked you if that was a joke!"

Frederick fumbled, dropping the pan on the stove as Will was suddenly *right there*, inches from his face. He had a hand raised as if he meant to grab him by the collar and shake him.

"Wha…yes." Frederick almost took a step back, frightened by the intensity in Will's flashing blue eyes. Or perhaps frightened wasn't the correct word. Pine, snow, and a fading hint of woodsmoke filled Frederick's lungs. Even in the hospital, even when he'd had Will strapped to a chair with a needle in the back of his hand, they had never been this close.

"Yes, you were joking?"

Frederick jolted. "Of course I was joking. I was being facetious, for God's sake. I...eh...I'd have thought you'd have a sense of gallows humor by now." He sneered, or tried to, and made a show of moving around Will, arms raised, to get back to the counter. Maggie was already there, stretching her long body for all it was worth in an attempt to get at the bacon. Frederick tore a circle of provolone cheese in half and gave it to her. He could feel Will's eyes burning holes in the back of his neck.

Please believe me. Please let it go.

Will took a step forward, his boots all too audible on the marble tiles. "Frederick, you—"

"Where did you two go anyway? This isn't the most pedestrian friendly neighborhood. No sidewalks. Barely even a shoulder on a road." Frederick sliced open the package of bacon, his hand shaking, and pulled out two pieces to dice for Maggie's omelet. "So, eh…So, what were you two doing?"

Christ, Frederick, get a hold of yourself.

Will came around to the opposite side of the counter, his gaze fixed on the marble surface as if deep in thought. If he was debating whether or not to drop the subject, he appeared to decide in Frederick's favor, for now. "Trespassing, probably."

"You two were…trespassing?"

Will removed his coat and draped it over one of the tall counter chairs that no one, including Frederick, had ever used. "Probably. Everything is owned by someone. I took Maggie into the woods past the field next door. It's a bit of a walk, but there's a large watershed stream some way's in. It's frozen now, of course, but I bet it's beautiful in spring, fast running. Reminds me of the one near my house. Ah, my former house."

Frederick perked up, unable to help the surge of pride. Not to mention that was probably the longest string of words Will had ever deigned to share with him that wasn't directly related to a serial killer. "Then you weren't trespassing. That's mine."

Will's brows drew together. "Yours?"

“This way?” Frederick pointed to the west side of the house. “My property covers the field and the woods beyond for a little less than a mile. The realtor said the property line was a stream.”

Will stared, brows practically at his hairline until Frederick grew irritated.

“What?”

“You own a mile’s worth of old forest? You?” Will’s expression turned to mocking wonder. “I had no idea you were so outdoorsy. You hide it well.”

Frederick balked. “I didn’t want any more neighbors, if you must know. I bought that land when I heard developers were considering it for an industrial park. And it’s not a mile, it’s more like three quarters. I am not ‘outdoorsy.’”

Okay, so he might have watched deer in the field a few times and thought it was beautiful and amazing that they could come so close to his house, but he was definitely not *outdoorsy.*

“No. You’re a conscientious nature lover who buys unspoiled woodlands to rescue from evil developers. Apparently.” Will tilted his head, his jaw tense as if fighting a smile. “Vonnegut, yoga, musical talent, and now this. What else are you hiding?”

"I am *so* glad I've been able to keep you sufficiently entertained during your stay." Frederick sprinkled the diced bacon into the bowl of eggs with a huff. He was going for severe, but only succeeded in petulant. The fact his nose was stuffed up wasn’t helping matters.

Will wasn’t finished. "If I snoop around after you leave the house, am I going to find bird watching books?"

"Who has time to just watch birds?" Like the wild turkeys that definitely didn’t come right up to his pool deck sometimes. Nope, never watched those.

"Hiking boots? Skis?" Will leaned forward, his expression so serious it was definitely fake. "If I find a snowboard, I'm leaving tonight."

"Oh-ho! I know what I want for Christmas then!" Frederick crowed, then wished he hadn’t. *Please don’t leave.*

But Will’s faux serious expression didn’t change. If anything, he laid it on thicker. “I’m sorry. There’s a lot I can take—”

“Understatement.”

“—but the mental image of you slicing your way down a slope in full snowboarding gear—”

“Christ.”

“—a coat covered in logo patches—”

Frederick set down the bowl, hard.

“—those puffy thermal pants, probably in a safety color like neon green or orange—”

“I’d rather die lost in the snow.”

“—and goggles. I swear, if you have a pair of mirrored snow goggles somewhere in this house—”

“Please, stop!” Frederick cried, the words broken with laughter. There was no keeping the picture Will painted from forming in his mind, so hideous it was enough to have him blushing as if it were real.

It was also enough, it seemed, to make him laugh. He sucked in a breath, startled, and saw Will’s poorly concealed smile. *Dios mío,* was Will Graham trying to *cheer him up*?

Will turned to face the expanse of windows, his gaze fixed on the view beyond the pool deck. Frederick opened his mouth, wanting to fill the sudden silence with more…something, anything, but snapped it shut again. He had no idea what to say.

Will rubbed at the back of his neck, further tousling his hair. “I think I’ll grab a shower and get back into those file boxes.”

File boxes. The fact that Will hadn’t gone straight for his throat when he came in was all the proof Frederick needed that he hadn’t read his session notes. Yet. He could have them out of the box and through his office shredder before Will even got out of the shower.

Or he could have, if the box were still on the breakfast table. It was gone.

Will crossed behind him, sending a surge of tension down Frederick’s spine as he headed to go upstairs. No, he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t spend all day and tomorrow, and who knew how long, waiting for Will to read solid proof of what a misjudging bitter son of a bitch he was. If it was going to happen, it might as well be now.

“Will?”

He stopped, waiting.

“That, eh, that box I gave you last night. I think I left some papers in there I didn’t mean to. I need to get them back.” A second passed, then another. The silence forced Frederick to turn around.

Will leaned against the hall corner, watching him, reading him. God damn the man. “You need them back?”

“Yes. They’re not anything to do with…” He wasn’t going to lie, and it wasn’t only because Will would see right through him. Lies were exhausting. He no longer had the energy for lies.

He cleared his throat again, wincing at the pain. Yeah, he was going to be drowning in cough syrup by dinner time. “Yes, I need them back so I can shred them. I would just like to make sure they—”

“You want your session notes.”

Frederick closed his eyes. It was better than screaming.

“All those little insights and theories you jotting down while you sat behind the white line?”

He read them. Of course he had read them.

“Relax, Frederick.” Will pushed himself away from the wall. “I didn’t read them. But, I think I could guess.”

Oh, no you couldn’t. Or maybe he really could. Jesus Christ, he wanted to sink into the floor. “Alright, can I have them back?”

Will made a low whistle. “They must be fascinating.”

“They’re *inaccurate*, is what they are, damn it, so can I please just—” His voice cracked, definitely because of the sore throat. No other reason.

“No.”

“Fine." *Bastard.* "*Read* them then.” He spun back around to the counter and started closing up the food packages.

“You can’t have them because they’re gone.”

The packet to cheese squished in his grasp.

Will moved back around the counter to where his coat hung on the bistro chair. “I wasn’t just getting fresh air when I went into the woods this morning. I borrowed this, hope you don’t mind.” He pulled something from the pocket of his coat, a small tin of Sterno ethanol gel, the sort used to heat the underside of fondue pots and chaffing dishes. Frederick blinked. He remembered buying that, years ago, when he thought he could be the sort of person who threw lavish dinner parties. When he thought he could be like Hannibal.

“You burned everything.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t read my notes.”

“No.”

Frederick swallowed. “Okay.”

“It’s just a pile of ashes now, buried in the woods.” Will came around the counter again on his way to the front hall, but he slowed, meeting Frederick’s eyes in a way that made it impossible for him to look away. “You could say it’s like that box never existed. Like it never happened.”

What… Frederick held his breath, waiting for the contradiction. '*But it did happen, and I won't forget,'* or something equally crushing, but Will said nothing more. He pressed his lips together, a shrug without the shrug, and headed upstairs to take his shower.

Frederick stared after him for a time, stunned. Forgetting wasn't forgiveness, but he would take it. A weight dropped from his shoulders, a lead blanket of dread he hadn't quite realized he was wearing. But the good feeling didn't last. Will had granted him absolution, if you wanted to be dramatic about it, without instigation. Frederick had not even tried to apologize for how he took steps to exploit Will while under his care, hadn't even brought up the subject until Will shoved it in his face with that talk of writing books, and still he forgave. Or at least forgot.

He lifted a hand to his cheek, unable to see it once it passed his nose and entered the field of his dead eye. He wanted to forgive, almost as much as he wanted to forget, but he couldn't. Just the thought of pretending he was 'over it', of giving a fake apology, left a rotten taste in his mouth. It didn't help that he had physical reminders to drag him back to that moment every day. How could he forget the circumstances of losing an eye when he rolled over each morning to see the fake staring at him from the nightstand?

There was something missing. He needed something more from Will than a simple apology, but he had no idea what that something was. Fuck, he was a mess.

A firm bump against his leg caused him to stumble.

"Oh, have I been ignoring you, Madam?"

Maggie huffed and did her funny little frustration dance next to the counter. Stupid human, didn't he realize she was starving to *death?* Frederick gave her a weak smile as he retrieved one of the yellow cans Will had purchased. He looked over the label, frowning at the disgusting brown blob of the photograph. You would think they would try to make it look less hideous in the advertising.

"Do you want this?" Frederick wiggled the can at her.

Maggie grunted as she hefted her weight up to put her paws on the counter. She was a good two feet from the bacon, but she seemed determined. Who could blame her? He picked up the bowl of eggs and moved to the stove.

"Can you be patient, then? Or do you want to eat that industrial castoff in a can?"

Maggie joined him at the stove and watched, patient as could be, as he poured the eggs into the warming pan. She was happy to wait for real food. Frederick hoped, more than he wanted to admit, that Will would wait for the real thing too.

Hindsight

Chapter Notes

Dec.18, 2018
More than a month since my last update. What the hell, right? I know...
Enjoy! [5,330 words]

Will stayed in the shower until his fingers pruned. It was a far cry from his usual five minute routine of wet-soap-rinse, but it was either that or return to the kitchen to shake Frederick *goddamned* Chilton until his teeth rattled. Will knew what he had seen through the glass leading to the kitchen.

Frederick, whipping eggs as if they had offended him, his gray cheeks turning red from whatever storm raged in his head…suddenly dropping the bowl as if it burned him, rushing to the sink with it…

For a moment, Will had thought Frederick was going to be sick, but it hadn't been nausea on his face. It had been fear, stark and consuming; the sort conjured up by one's own mind. And that was when Will knew.

A bowl of eggs was hardly a loaded gun, but Frederick struck him as the sort whose pride would not allow for anything too obvious, anything that might make an embarrassing obituary. Cause of death, acute renal failure as a result of dietary negligence. So many people ignored doctors' orders, especially when it came to food. Colleagues and passing readers would understand, maybe even sympathize. Such a technical, respectable way to go. Or maybe people would remember why he couldn't eat meat, then his death would be blamed on Abel Gideon. Cause of death, medical complications due to previous assault. Even more respectable.

Will pulled the towel from around his hips and scrubbed it over his wet hair. Regardless of methods and obituaries, Hannibal wouldn't be fooled. He would read about Frederick's death and know he had won again. It would be a small victory, worth nothing more to him than a slight twitch of the lips and a content perusal of his cell, but still another win, another pawn off the board. He, like Will, would know what Frederick had done to himself.

Don't you dare *give him anything…*

Will flung the towel back toward the bathroom and set to shoving his dirty clothes into his duffle, not caring that they now shared space with the clean ones. That finished, he tossed it toward the door, only to drop his shoulders at the stupid gesture. It was Christmas Eve, and the odds of finding another motel that day or tomorrow were slim to none. Not to mention he wasn't particularly enthusiastic about another motel room, with damp sheets and worrying

smells coming from the heating vents. Frederick had indicated last night that he was welcome to stay, even if '*Do what you want. I don't care'* was hardly a waving banner of hospitality. Still, with as much as those words must have cost his pompous ex-jailer, it was practically a request.

He shouldn't be alone.

Will ruffled his damp curls, as much to dry them as shake his thoughts into a better position. He had to focus on the task at hand, not allow his newfound interest—*interest?*—in Frederick's personal situation to distract him.

The so-called Horseman—thanks for nothing, Freddie Lounds—was going to kill again. Jack was worried he might be ready to take his primary victim, that he had already reached the 'end of his list', as Zeller had suggested, in which case their opportunities for new leads and evidence would vanish along with the killer. But Will knew better. The Horseman wanted his primary targets, father and child, to squirm, and that meant exposure.

A deer doesn't tremble unless it knows it's being stalked.

Will pulled a set of fresh clothes from the duffle he had just tossed toward the door and dressed. It wasn't until he was working the last button on the crisp slate blue dress shirt, the silk-like cotton sliding across his shoulders, that he remembered the last time he had worn it…the reason he had bought it…the dark maroon eyes surveying it in amused approval—

A vicious sound escaped him as he tore the shirt off over his head, fine shell buttons popping. It was just a shirt, but his breathing relaxed when he sent the crumpled ball across the room to disappear somewhere behind the nightstand.

Things had gotten better since he returned to Jack and the FBI. Now he could go whole days, sometimes two or three, without thinking of Hannibal. It was not what he had expected. It was his fear of falling into that old obsession that had kept him dodging Jack's calls for months. He had grown…accustomed to existing in Hannibal's orbit, like living through a long, harsh winter. Then spring comes and you have no idea what to do with the warmth.

But the case gave him something to focus on, a new center to orbit, though he wasn't fond of the notion that he required a new obsession to get through the day.

He finished dressing in one of his older flannel shirts, wrinkled all to hell and missing a button on the left cuff, and opened the door to find Maggie stretched out across the hallway, her nose an inch from the door jam.

"How long have you been there?"

She struggled up to her feet and stretched her head to receive his attention. She closed her eyes as he rubbed around her ears, perfectly content. He had always loved that look on his dogs. Perfect happiness, perfect trust for someone she had known only a few days. Some people believed dogs were excellent judges of character, that they held a sixth sense about people. He'd heard any number of anecdotes about dogs disliking someone who turned out to

be terrible, as if they were fur covered fortune tellers. That his dogs had taken so easily to Hannibal certainly put the lie to that stereotype, or at least knocked it down a few notches.

Maggie plodded behind him down the stairs, her overlong body forcing her to take the steps two at a time. The fading scent of cooking still filled the ground floor. He smiled down at the dog.

“Got eggs out of him again, huh?”

She danced around him for a second before trotting ahead through the kitchen. She disappeared around the corner toward the living room, where the sound of a TV on low volume reached him just before a flustered shout.

“Off! No, come—you’re crushing my paperwork!”

Will followed to see Frederick sitting on one the white sofas, his socked feet crossed on a white ottoman, as Maggie tried her best to fill the small space between his chest and the open computer on his lap. She had also managed to knock a good stack of papers to the floor.

“She likes you.”

Frederick winced as he used one arm to cradle Maggie’s chest and hold her away from him. “She *likes* bacon.”

“Unless you have bacon on you right now, she likes you.”

“Oh, lucky me. My life is now complete." The words came out sounding closer to *Oh lugybe,* followed by a wet sniffle. As if to prove his sincerity, he shot a nasty scowl at Maggie, who bypassed his arm and gave the scowl a firm lick. “Ugh! Do something about your dog!*”*

As a lifelong dog lover, Will knew a dog hater when he saw one. Frederick held Maggie under her chest, his broad hand cradled perfectly under her deep breast bone rather than digging into her belly or shoving against her neck, and his attempts to push her away were more like hopeful suggestions. *And* Maggie, who had peed all over the house and destroyed two books, had eaten more organic egg omelets in the past three days than Will had in…ever.

Frederick Chilton was no dog hater.

“Is she?”

Frederick pulled a wrinkled file out from under Maggie’s paw and set to his other side on the couch. “What?”

“I said, is she? *My* dog?”

“Well I don’t see the degenerate who left who out in the snow knocking at the door, do you?” Frederick released Maggie, frowning in his defeat as he moved the rest of the paperwork to his other side. Maggie collapsed into the newly cleared space against his thigh. It wasn’t his lap, but close enough.

Will took a few steps into the room, pretending to be interested in the local news on the TV. "I mean, is she my dog or yours? I think she might be yours."

Frederick let out a sound that was half laugh, half cough. "*My* dog?"

"She is in your house."

"Because *you* brought her in."

"She was digging through *your* garbage cans."

Frederick gawked at him as if he had gone simple. "So do the damn squirrels, I'm sure, but I'm not bringing them in to sleep on my duvet."

"And she spent the night sleeping on your duvet." He turned back toward the kitchen, pressing his lips to hide a smirk. "Congratulations, Frederick."

"Now see here, *Graham!*"

Will waved over his shoulder on his way back to the kitchen. "I have a lot of reading to do. Try to keep your dog quiet."

Frederick let out another sound of disgust, followed a second later by a quiet, "There's coffee on the stove, if you want it."

Well. "Thanks."

"I figured I had better make it ahead of time rather than let you bungle the French press."

There he is. "I know how to use a French press."

"Oh, pardon!" Frederick drawled from the next room. "I took you for the Folgers instant type."

He was, but decided to keep that information to himself.

Returning to the kitchen, he gave the space a once over and was relieved to see that it was again spotless. Despite his limited exposure to Frederick's personal habits, a general fussiness of person and environment were practically givens. A few eggshells left on the counter, a wrinkled dress shirt, and Frederick might as well be waving red flags of distress.

Will poured himself a cup of, admittedly, wonderful smelling coffee, and took it to his pile of files on the main table. For someone who had built a life on preening self advancement, Frederick was pitifully easy to read. He wore his heart not just on his sleeve, but on his cheeks and the tips of his ears. Not to mention the way his whole upper body moved when he drew a deep breath, or the way his eyes grew big and darting when he was surprised or worried. Frederick Chilton was a walking ball of expression.

Then why didn't I see it sooner?

Will slapped the file folder open and flipped the pages up to his last place. He had serious work to do, and it wasn't going to be helped with him wasting his time playing twenty-twenty hindsight. Slipping into this killer's skin was the pressing concern, but it was proving more difficult than usual.

"Usual…" Will scoffed.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he closed the second file and finished off the last swallow of cold coffee. The sound of the TV and keyboard tapping from the next room had been joined by a persistent, and growing, cough. Grabbing his empty cup, he rose and passed the entryway to the living room just as Frederick muffled another wracking series of coughs into a balled up tissue. Will averted his eyes and headed for the stove. Frederick wouldn't be sick if he hadn't gone out in the freezing middle of the night in nothing but sweaty workout clothes. Which he had only done to bring Will a box containing the last shreds of his dignity and peace of mind…

"Fuck."

Another barrage of coughing from the living room almost distracted him from the faint buzzing sound that suddenly filled the kitchen. Looking around, he spotted a phone on the counter under the cork board, lighting up and vibrating its way precariously toward the edge.

He snatched it up before it could fall, causing his fingers to graze the screen. A picture of a half-eaten muffin bounced up with the name **Worst Patient**, along with the timer showing an active call. *Damn it.*

"Hello? Doc?" A woman's voice sounded through the little speaker.

"No. Hold on a second, I'll get him."

"Oh. Who is this?"

"A reluctant guest. Just a second." He headed toward the living room.

"Are you at a Christmas party? I can call back later."

He entered the living room and Frederick's eyes rounded at the sight of his brushed silver phone pressed to Will's ear. "Who are you talking to?"

"Your 'worst patient'?" he said, giving Frederick an amused look. "Here."

"Whaaat?" The woman's voice sounded through the speaker, followed by a few more words he didn't make out.

Frederick snatched the phone from his hand. "Don't ever become a secretary."

"Sound advice."

"Hello, El—A term of endearment, I assure you," Frederick snarked into the phone, though the bite was lost under a look Will could only call affectionate exasperation.

Interesting.

"My worst patients spend their days in *very* long sleeved jackets, so—What?" Frederick's eyes rounded again, shooting a glance at Will. "Certainly not….No… Need I remind you, again, that you are the patient and my personal life is entirely meaningless to our conversations. Oh, now you're just splitting hairs…"

Frederick's entire demeanor lightened. His shoulders, which must be tense so often it had become barely noticeable, dropped several inches and the near permanent etch between his brows smoothed out.

"No, I-I'm not at a party," Frederick said through a few sputtering coughs. "You know I'm so popular and have to send my regrets on *so many* invitations, I accidentally declined all of them this year. Can you imagine?"

Will gawked. Was Frederick—Dr. Frederick Chilton—actually making fun of himself? "Wow."

"Hold on." Frederick cupped his hand over the phone and gave Will a hard wide-eyed stare, complete with snarky head wiggle. Will held up his hands, still smirking, and went back to the kitchen table.

It was hard to focus on the thirty-year-old psyche evaluation, however, when a few minutes later Frederick came bustling into the kitchen on socked feet, his expression no longer relaxed.

"You did *what?* How—and he was arrested? You're sure of that?" He pressed the phone between his ear and shoulder as he reached for the coffee urn on the stove. "Alright, well at least the police know who he is now and they caught him in the act so the report won't just be dismissed. Wait, what? What do you mean you didn't file a report?" Frederick's eyes grew even larger, if such was possible, and his jaw went slack. "You *trapped* him in a—Okay, never mind the fact that I just lost *years off my life*, thank you for that, what was he arrested for if you didn't stay?"

Will pressed his hands along the edge of the table, ready to stand, though for what reason he had no idea. Frederick's worry was beginning to feel contagious. "Who was arrested?"

Frederick waved at him for silence. "That may be, but it could have gone quite differently. You could have gotten hurt or—" Frederick listened for a moment, then laid a hand across his eyes before dragging it down to pinch the bridge of his nose. "*Ay díos*, *tu serás mi muerte...*"

Frederick continued the back and forth, a strange mix of chastisement, worry, and barely concealed pride. Hearing only one side of the conversation did little to build a coherent picture, but apparently this woman had done something risky to get someone arrested, and Frederick was both worried and proud. He was also smiling and laughing, when he wasn't frowning, and spoke about pushing up their appointment rather than waiting for next week, which all sounded a lot more familiar than he would expect from a doctor and patient. Huh.

Will forced his attention, or at least his eyes, back to the file before him. Was Frederick getting involved with a private patient? The unconscious affection in his voice suggested it was a possibility, which forced him to recall that Frederick had done much worse. Getting romantically involved with a patient probably wouldn't be a blip on his medical ethics radar. It was...disappointing.

Why?

A deep sigh filled the sudden silence of the kitchen, and Will looked up to see Frederick leaning back against the counter edge, his called ended and the phone pressed between both hands.

"Patient problems?" Will cringed at the coldness in his voice. It was none of his business.

"You could say that." He headed back toward the living room, but stopped in the entryway to look back. "What do you know about stalking laws?"

"Stalking laws?"

"Yes. You were a homicide cop, and I assume stalking was something you dealt with?"

Will pressed his lips together as memories he wished he didn't have came flooding back. He could think of half a dozen cases right off, murdered women whose killers had been pathetically easy to find. After all, most of them were named right in the files because they already had restraining orders on them. Useless fucking restraining orders.

"I can tell you that stalking laws are a joke. They're mostly retroactive, just there so the DA can add additional charges after the fact."

Frederick chewed at the side of his bottom lip. "After the fact?"

"After the stalker already attacked or killed the victim. Getting restraining orders are rather easy, so long as the filer and the accused don't work in the same place or live in the same building, but it's just a piece of paper." Will closed the file in front of him. "If you could be more specific…"

Frederick approached the table. "It's about a patient, so I, eh…"

"I don't need to know her name. What's going on?"

Frederick wavered for a second before coming around the table and pulling out the chair next to him. He still had his phone pressed between his hands. "Alright, a patient of mine told me last week that someone has been following her around, watching her, and it's been going on months."

"Has he made any threats?"

"No, that's the thing. He doesn't *do* anything. Has never tried to talk to her or approach her, he's just watching. And she doesn't know who he is."

“That is a problem. You can’t file a report without a name, and some loose description of a guy who happens to be in the same place as her in public is just going to make her sound—“ Will looked across the room. “*Is* someone following her?”

“She is not delusional.”

“She is seeing a psychiatrist. And calling his home number.”

Frederick leaned back, his expression hard. “You of all people know better than that. She has none of the indicators of a histrionic personality disorder, she’s not making this up. Besides, she’s not even a voluntary patient, which almost all attention seeking patients are. Her school requested she see a therapist in more of a…a guidance counselor capacity.”

“Her school?” Will suddenly remembered the journal he had seen on Frederick’s nightstand, the one Maggie had so kindly butchered. *Pediatric Psychology.* His patient was a kid. Now he felt like a real asshole. Nice.

He continued before Frederick could answer, "If 'some guy', I assume an adult, is following a minor around and watching her, that's a different story."

"But is it different to the police? Will they do anything?"

"They might put an unmarked car on her for a day or two, hope the guy shows up and she points him out, but..." He looked meaningfully at Frederick's phone. "Is this still an issue? Who did she get arrested?"

Frederick groaned and once again cupped a hand over his eyes like he was the most put-upon man alive. "She did something today. Long story short, she let this man follow her somewhere, then managed to lock him in, and...and somehow he got arrested for trespassing and menacing? There was someone else there who called the police—" Frederick turned away, coughing hard against the crook of his elbow.

"Mmm. Sounds like she took care of it herself." It also sounded like Frederick was genuinely concerned for this kid's welfare, which was a pleasant surprise. Though why should he be surprised? For all Frederick's character flaws, Will would never have placed heartlessness among them. He was ambitious and short-sighted, or had been. He wasn't a monster.

"Argh! You sound just like her! *'I'm a problem solver, Doc, relax.*'" He imitated the last with exaggerated calm and a slightly higher voice, which only sounded more amusing with the nasal congestion. Rising from his seat, Frederick rubbed at his nose and returned to the stove where he had forgotten his coffee cup. His color, which had improved a bit while on the phone, had drained off once more. He swayed a bit on his way back to the living room, his forehead showing a noticeable sheen.

"You look like shit."

Frederick clutched his chest with one hand. "*Aww.* Flattery will not get you a larger guest room."

"I'm serious, you don't look well," he said, foolishly ignoring the voice in his head telling him to shut his mouth and mind his own business.

"I haven't 'looked well' in almost two years. I—" Frederick looked away suddenly, rubbing the back of his neck with a shaky hand. In a softer voice, he said, "I'm fine. Just a cold."

And that was that, or so Will thought until he heard himself asking, "Does your patient's parents know about this stalker?"

"Her situation is...complicated. I wouldn't inform anyone anyway."

"Because of confidentiality?"

"Because she wouldn't want me to." Frederick gave a rueful smile. "I remember being a teenager, how unhelpful well-meaning adults could be. Don't you?"

Oh, yeah. He remembered.

Frederick disappeared back into the living room and his paperwork, while Will sank slowly into the world of a man who had spent seventeen years killing and mutilating prostitutes from the same four truck stops. His profile was nothing like the previous two killers on the list. Radically different motives, or stated motives, methods, patterns. They didn't even have similar personal lives, from what precious little there was on that. Apparently none of them had been much interested in discussing their children or former non-murdering lives with the hospital staff. The only thing this one had in the common with the others, as far as Will could see, was that his children were now dead, butchered and left for display.

It was blue-grey outside when Frederick ambled back into the kitchen to make something delicious smelling, which Will dutifully ate after accepting Frederick's intensely casual offer. It was full dark by the time he tipped the lid off another filebox, only to be saved by his phone ringing. He wasn't getting anywhere.

"Jack?"

"He tried to take another one, but she got away."

"What!" He shot out of his seat. "Where?"

"*Elkton, close to the Delaware border. I'm texting you the address. I already have CSU on the way, but I'm trying to get there before the locals screw up our scene."*

"Wait, if you aren't there yet how do you know—"

"I had intel compile a list of known children for resent convicted serial killers and their current addresses. She was on it. When local PD got the call about an attempted abduction, it was flagged and they called us."

"Which one? Who's the father?"

"Philip Swenson. I can have the office email you a write-up."

Will grabbed his coat, pulling it on as he switched hands on the phone. "I know him."

"You know him?"

"Before my time, but I used to reference that investigation in my lectures."

"The textbook sexual sadist, if I remember. I have the local PD on the other line, I'm trying to get them to cordon off the whole block around the house. Get there."

The line went dead and he shoved the phone in his pocket. It was just past five-thirty, not the best time for traffic leaving Baltimore, but it was also Christmas Eve. Pulling his keys from his pocket, he leaned around the corner to the living room. "Jack called and I..."

Frederick's computer and papers had been shoved to the middle of the ottoman. He lay curled up on his side on the sofa, his face half buried in the crook of his elbow. He was dead asleep. Maggie, who seemed to have done her best to fit into the space behind Frederick's knees, lifted her head.

"Shhh." He backed out of the room and made sure to keep his keys from jingling as he slipped out the front door. There was no question about it now. Frederick had a dog.

*****

The sound was relentless, drilling into his eardrums like an ice-pick. He tried to roll over in the hopes of burying his head in the cushions, only to be stopped by the warm lump draped over one of his leg.

"Oh, come on. Maggie..."

At the sound of her name she was up, happy to nose her way into the newly free space between him and the back of the sofa. He pulled himself to a sitting position just as another earsplitting volley of rings hit his head. Rings. Shit.

He reached for his phone. It took him a moment to recognize the number, which he had yet to put in his new contacts list. "Helnm..."

"Frederick?"

"Yeah, eh..." He cleared his throat, and damn did that hurt. "Will?"

"Yes, it's me. I..." There was a lot of commotion in the background, voices and the beeping sound of a truck backing up. *"I'm in Elkton. That's close to the Delaware border."*

"Okaaay. Did you breakdown?"

A deep sigh crackled through the phone. *"I need your help with something."*

"Uh-huh. In Elkton." He was still too asleep for this.

"I need your help at a crime scene."

Now he was awake. "What?"

"We're pretty sure the Horseman tried to take another victim, but she got away when her dog attacked him."

"But she got away, so it's not a crime scene?"

"CSU is going over the street with flood lights and magnifying glasses. If he dropped one viable hair off his head, it will give us something. They're also testing the dog."

"Since when does the FBI want my help with anything? I'm not Jack Crawford's favorite person and the feeling is mutual." He struggled to his feet, swaying as the blood seemed to rush out of his head. What could they want from him anyway? Even during his brief forays with profiling, he had never visited a crime scene, a trend he was happy to continue.

"Jack isn't asking. I am."

Oh. He waited, listening to the background noise through the phone as his heart-rate began to rise. *No, no, calm down.* "What do you need?"

"I need you to come here and conduct a witness interview."

Frederick closed his eyes, wondering if he was even awake. Was this a fever dream? Was he hallucinating? He snorted into the phone. "Really?"

"Yes, really. I'm...not good interviewing witnesses or survivors. And Jack and the others haven't had much luck getting her to open up. She's only fourteen, and the parents aren't helping."

In other words, Crawford's aura of suffocating intimidation wasn't getting them anywhere. How surprising. "My experience with pediatric therapy is rusty, at best. I left that field behind years ago—"

"*You have a minor age patient right now. I don't need an expert, I need someone who can talk to a child without making them feel like they're about to be arrested. And, well...It's Christmas Eve. I think Jack has already tried to get someone else, but—"*

Frederick made an ugly sound. "Aw, let me guess. The Duchess of Bloom declined to come down from her tower? You know she doesn't consort with the peasants anymore."

"Frederick." Will's voice was a warning.

"Don't tell her I called her that."

"If you come conduct this interview."

That was almost funny. "Save your threats. Fine. Where, again?"

"Elkton, almost to the Delaware border."

"That's an hour drive!"

"Hour and a half, but CSU is going to be here all night."

Christ he was exhausted. And sick. And old. Okay, he was not old yet, but couldn't he suffer a rare bout of flu in peace? He headed for the stairs, Maggie's nails clicking behind him. "Fine. Tell me about the witness."

"Holly Swenson, fourteen, her father was—is—Philip Swenson."

"Ugh." He knew that name.

"Yeah, that one. He never claimed an insanity defense. He's still sitting on death row in Pennsylvania. What we have so far is that she was returning home from a friend's house when someone waiting, possibly behind a van, grabbed her from behind and pressed a rag over her face..."

Frederick swayed at the top of the stairs, bile touching the back of his throat.

"...but her dog was either with her or nearby and attacked him. She ran away back to her house and called the cops. After that, everything is a mess. She changed her story about which friend's house she was coming from, and the parents are saying the dog isn't theirs but she says it is."

Frederick could hear Will's weary frustration coming down the phone line. "Okay, but tell me about *her*. Give me your impressions of the girl and the family."

"Why does that matter?"

Because first impressions were everything. "It matters. Just tell me."

There was a long pause, during which the noise of the background grew faint as if Will was walking away to collect his thoughts. *"The family is stretched thin, working class, though they may have had money sometime before. Holly is the oldest and the only step child. The other three kids belong to the mom and her current husband. There are no photos of Holly anywhere that I could see, but plenty of the parents and the other three kids. None of her things are lying around the house, it's as if she doesn't exist there outside her bedroom. Holly called the police herself, and the locals told us the parents were angry with her for calling even after she told them what had happened. And she doesn't know."*

"Doesn't know?" Frederick flicked on the closet light and began sifting through the hangars.

"About her father, his crimes. Swenson is a common enough name. The mother has been adamant that no one say anything to her. Her exact words, 'I've had a hard enough time trying to forget that bastard with her here, I don't need more of it.'

Frederick could practically feel Will's disgust through the phone. He didn't blame him. But, it gave him an idea of the approach he wanted to use. He pulled a hangar from the rack and sighed, his pounding head begging him to just slip under a warm blanket and into oblivion. He could do this. A large dose of DayQuil, some coffee, and he would be fine. He *could* do this.

Why was he going to do this? He didn't owe the FBI a damn thing, and certainly not Will. He had paid his dues and then some.

"She also has a clear hostility to authority figures," Will added. *"She shutdown the moment Jack tried to get a description out of her."*

"Give me two hours."

"We don't have time to waste. The parents are already giving us—"

"Yes, I know. Two hours. Goodbye." He hung up and leaned his forehead against the cool wood of the doorframe. He didn't owe them, but maybe he owed himself. If treating Ellery over the past year had shown him anything, it was that using his skills to actually help someone felt surprisingly good.

And if he managed to do something that Jack Crawford and his department of self-righteous conclusions jumpers couldn't, well...that would feel pretty good too.

Elkton

Chapter Notes

> This chapter's another long one at 9,916 words. I had originally intended to gloss over the scene with Frederick speaking to the victim, but then reconsidered. After all, the best part of fanfiction is there's no publisher/editor demanding you cut scenes. I'm gonna write ALL THE SCENES ;)
>
> PS: I tagged Zeller/Price from day one and, I promise, it's actually going to make a real appearance soon.

Frederick was fine as he emerged from the swiftest shower of his life and darted around the room to dress. He was fine as he styled his hair to perfection, doing in five minutes what usually took twenty, and he was fine as he took extra—but still swift—effort with his new need for cosmetics. He would say, if pressed, that he was just fine as he donned his favorite wool dress coat, charcoal gray with soft black shearling on the half collar, and pulled on a pair of dark burgundy leather gloves he had purchased over a year ago and never gotten a chance to wear. He was still fine—really—as he stood blocking the door to the garage while Maggie made efforts to push past him. He gently pushed her back and assuring her that she wouldn't be alone long and that there was absolutely no reason to destroy anything this time.

He left the TV on. Maybe dogs liked that.

An hour later, and more than seventy miles down the dark highway, he was a little better than fine with half a bottle of liquid flu medicine buzzing through his veins, and possible scenarios for the upcoming interview running a loop in his head. His brief foray into pediatric psychology had been years ago, consisting mostly of adjunct work he had done when he was still smarting from his failure to become a surgeon. He had been good, he knew that. He had a knack for speaking to children, to teenagers. He knew how to sit across from people who felt small and insignificant no matter what they did or said, who were desperate to reach some imaginary point in the future where they would be taken seriously and respected.

He had been a fine psychiatrist then, he supposed, but fine had never been good enough for him. It would have to be good enough now.

Elkton was a moderate sized town, comprised of the same compact pre-depression houses and ugly modern storefronts that seemed to exemplify the North East. The sedate voice of his phone navigation app became unnecessary once he saw the blue and red lights bouncing off the low cloud cover up ahead, creating a kaleidoscope across the weeks of snowpack. He suddenly felt less than fine as he parked on a side street a few yards from a wide police barricade, which was already surrounded by a few reporters and a lot of gawking neighbors.

It was almost midnight on Christmas Eve, but even he couldn't bring himself to sneer at their ill-timed rubbernecking. Were it his neighborhood, he would be doing much the same.

Holding his leather folio like a shield, rather than the performance prop it was about to become, he made his way across the street and to the police line. Blue jackets with FBI emblazoned on the backs moved around the street beyond, where the cordoned off area seemed to include most of the block. Down the way he could see another line of police tape blocking off the other end of the street. A generator growled somewhere, powering the flood lights that pointed at an area of sidewalk and driveway, where several crime scene workers scoured the ground.

It was not a scene Frederick had much experience with, and yet something viscerally familiar seemed to crawl up his back. Lights, voices, guns, *his arms tightly cuffed behind him as he tried to stay upright in the backseat of Crawford's SUV...arriving at Quantico where the rage filled eyes of the agents sliced him like scalpels... stripped, processed, hands that gripped him too tight and shoved him too hard...hateful threats hissed through clenched teeth... a vengeful fist landing against his side where it wouldn't show later under the ugly orange jumpsuit…*

Frederick was no longer fine.

He took a step back from police line, the urge to flee bypassing his brain and going straight to his feet. This was stupid. *He* was being stupid. Of all the things that had happened to him in the past two years, being arrested shouldn't even make the top of the list. And yet, what haunted him the most wasn't Gideon's calm words as he pulled out his intestines, or even the site of the agents gutted across his kitchen surfaces. It was running through the woods as someone meant to protect and help him bellowed his name and fired warning shots. It was sitting on a hard chair under hard lights as the very people meant to be the last safe haven circled him with unconcealed hatred.

It was knowing how easily the heroes could become your monsters if they just didn't like you.

Frederick drew a deep breath, feverish heat rushing to his face as he looked around to see if his panic had gone unnoticed. No one appeared to be paying attention to him, but either way he was here. Best to get on with it.

He waved a hand at the nearest uniformed cop manning the line. "Excuse me, Officer?"

The cop stomped toward the barricade. "This is a police line, *sir*. Stay back."

What the hell? "Yes, but I have to speak to—"

"When the FBI issues a statement you can read it like everyone else." The cop looked him up and down with a sour expression, taking in his fine coat and finer three-piece suit with a look of amusement.

Frederick straightened his shoulders and wondered if he had ever thanked Ellery's friend for the garish slogan T-shirt. If not, he certainly planned to.

"I'm expected inside. I was called." *I'm important to this situation, unlike you.*

The cop gave him an incredulous look and walked away toward his fellow uniforms.

Frederick pulled out his phone with a huff. It wasn't his fault the local police had been pulled away from their preferred holiday duty, which no doubt consisted of sitting in a speed trap somewhere. He stabbed his thumbs at the screen.

I'm at the police line. Send someone.

He stared at the screen for well over a minute, waiting for the blinking dots of an income message to appear. Maybe Will wasn't a texter, which wouldn't surprise him. It was a wonder the hermit of the Virginia wilderness even had a smart-phone.

"Dr. Chilton?"

Frederick looked as an agent he didn't recognize approached him from the other side of the line. She had shoulder length blonde hair and a no nonsense hardness to her eyes.

"Yes." He lifted his head and straightened his shoulders, all confidence. "Will Graham called me."

"Yep, this way." She broke the police tape with one tug against the barricade, letting it flutter away. The cop shouted an objection, which the agent didn't bother to acknowledge.

Ha-ha. Frederick added a mental raspberry for good measure.

They passed several small houses, all of them with lights on and faces pressed to the windows. He danced around heavy snow drifts for the sake of his best wingtips while turning his face from the few phone cameras he saw pressed up to the windows too. Up ahead was the center of the night's circus; a drab brown house that had been converted into a duplex at some point. Agents stood around the narrow front steps, writing on clipboards and taking tiny paper bags from the other agents who brought them. Two vans had been backed up toward the house, their rear doors open to reveal plastic crates awaiting evidence.

More than a few agents looked up as he passed, only to do double takes when they realized who he was. He recognized several of them too, a few better than others. Just as they reached the bottom of the duplex steps, he took a moment to look around and spotted an agent kneeling over one of the evidence crates in the van. A tall man with curly brown hair and a generous nose looked up just in time to lock eyes with him.

Frederick gasped and turned away, almost colliding with the thin metal railing of the steps. A flash of remembered pain throbbed from his ribs.

'That's for Beverly, you sick bastard.'

"You okay, doctor?" The agent who escorted him gave him a hard look, like someone judging a broken down car.

"Yes, of course. I just have a bit of a cold." He thought he was going to be sick.

The front door opened suddenly, letting out a woman's angry voice and a tight faced Will Graham. He went straight to Frederick like he was a Godsend…and wasn't that a unique experience?

Frederick smoothed down the front of his coat.

"Jack is keeping the mother under control. Barely." He glanced back at the house like it was on fire.

Hello to you too. "I can imagine. Threats of obstructing justice? Witness tampering?"

Will made a face that was equal parts disapproving and resigned, which was as good as a yes. Crawford certainly was consistent in his methods. "You won't be so quick to condemn Jack once you meet them."

"I'd rather avoid the pleasure and just speak to the victim. Please tell me you've at least managed to separate her from her parents over the last few hours."

Will nodded, though his tight jaw suggested there was more to it. "She's in her room. CSU and the medics finished with her about half an hour ago, so we're running out of leverage with the parents. I told them a psychologist was coming and it was best for their daughter's mental health." Will let out a laugh that could have curdled milk. "The only way the mother could refuse that would have been to outright admit she doesn't give a damn."

Well.

The front door opened again to reveal Jack, hands shoved in his coat pockets as he filled the doorway. "Doctor." He gave Will a look and turned back into the house, leaving the door open.

"Charming as ever," Frederick muttered under his breath as they ascended the stairs.

Will gave him a warning look before they passed the threshold and dropped into Frederick's déjà vu hell. Low ceilings and narrow rooms, where the bare minimum of furniture made them feel like a storage unit. Shabbily painted drywall, probably white at some point, tinged to an ugly grey-cream from years of cigarette smoke and apathy. A stifling heat that magnified every passing scent in the house until you felt like you were living at the bottom of a laundry hamper.

Suddenly he was eleven years old again, spending yet another long evening in a neighbor's apartment while his mother slogged through a second shift. The only thing missing was green carpet and the sound of *Three's Company* crackling from a bunny-ear TV.

"Great. More people," came a bored voice from the direction of the living room. A man probably around Frederick's age, though one whose personal maintenance easily let him pass for ten years older, occupied a recliner across the room. He took a long draw from a beer bottle before wiping the condensation away on his camouflage pajama pants.

“Mr. McKenna, this is Dr. Frederick Chilton.” Jack spoke with his eyes mostly on the ceiling. “We would like him to interview Holly briefly to see if there’s any—”

“Oh, what? To see if there’s any more shit she can make up for attention?”

Jack closed his eyes like a man begging for strength, while Will turned his head sharply away to the front door. Frederick suddenly found himself the only remaining target for eye contact. A woman, rather younger than Frederick had expected, stood in the entrance to the kitchen. Her dyed red-brown hair was cut in a severe bob, the sort made higher at the back than the front. She cradled a glowing cell phone in one hand while managing a half burned cigarette in the other.

“Eh…Mrs. McKenna?” Frederick took a step forward.

“Yeah. You’re the one here to make sure Holly isn’t *traumatized?*” She rolled her eyes so hard the irises all but disappeared. “Great. Go upstairs, pat her on the head, and tell her the *whole* goddamn world is revolving around her ass right now. Then we can be done for the year. Merry fucking Christmas.”

Oh.

Oh God.

Frederick pressed his lips together, swallowed words he hadn’t used in public since his college days.

“Yes, eh…” He coughed, taking the opportunity to focus on pulling out a handkerchief. “If there have been any fabrications on Holly’s part, that will also be part of the interview.”

That seemed to brighten Elkton’s parent of the year. “Yeah? Good, then. Maybe you can get her to admit she made this whole fucking thing up so she wouldn’t get nailed for missing curfew.”

Frederick nodded, which was better than saying anything he would have liked. He was ready to make the usual explanations for why he needed to see the child alone, how children are more forthcoming without a parent present and all that, but it proved unnecessary when Mrs. McKanna just waved him off in the direction of a narrow staircase. Luckily, she seemed content retreating back into the kitchen to lean against the sink and tap at her phone.

Frederick turned back to Will and Jack. "So, the killers aren't actually worse part of your job?"

Will snorted, a quick involuntary sound that had him turning sharply away. Jack raised his brow, looking like he didn't, for once, despise every inch of him. It didn't last long. "Alright, Doctor, here's what we need. A description, anything she can give us. So far all we've gotten is 'It was dark' and 'I think he was tall.' We also need to know where she was before the attack because he might have followed her from there. It's probably somewhere she wasn't supposed to be, which is why she's giving us conflicting stories. Also, ask her if—"

"I'm not interrogating her. That won't work."

Jack glowered. "Then why the hell are you here?"

Frederick smiled. "I'm here to talk to a child without making her feel like she's about to be arrested."

Will gave him that warning look again, but he'd swear there was amusement in it now. Or at least an appreciation of irony. Jack gave a last hard look to both of them before he headed for the front door, no doubt in need of fresh air.

Will looked up the stairs, much in the same way visitors would look down the corridors of Frederick's hospital. "Good luck."

Luck hadn't done much for Frederick in a long time, but the sentiment was welcome as he headed up.

The stairs were narrow, walled on both sides with and covered in fading hand prints from hip level down. From about shoulder height and up were scattered family photos in various novelty frames. As Will had mentioned, not a single one of them included a teenaged girl, or even a younger girl. Just three young boys, staggered close in age, occasionally with a parent while the other probably snapped the shot. It was all Christmas mornings with mounds of wrapping paper, summer days at a lake or river somewhere, a few school photos with the same unnatural side body pose that had been inflicted on children since the dawn of photography. The three younger children hadn't been downstairs, and he doubted they were upstairs alone somewhere. Probably a relative had shown up at some point in the night's chaos to hasten them away.

The upstairs hall was really just a landing leading off to three doors, all currently closed. One sported a wooden plaque, the sort made in a high school shop class, with the burned on phrase *My other room is a hobbit-hole.*

Frederick removed his overcoat and draped it over one arm, bracing himself like an actor about to enter the stage. He disliked the comparison as soon as he thought of it. It was too close to the last time he had braced himself for an important performance, the day he had met Will Graham and tried to sell him and Jack a basket full of lies about Abel Gideon. He had fooled himself at the time, in more ways than one, but in hindsight he knew they had seen through him right from the start.

He knocked.

A few long seconds passed before a hesitate voice answered. "Yeah?"

"Miss Swenson? May I come in?"

Another long pause. "Guess so."

He opened the door onto a small square room with one window facing the street. A twin bed had been pushed up into the corner, the length extending under the window. A young girl sat

on the bed cross-legged, a purple stuffed animal—alien? Creature?— filling her lap. Will had said she was fourteen, but she was slight even for that age, with long wispy hair so blonde it was almost white. He had a suspicion that Mrs. McKenna, with her burgundy dye job, had the same natural hair.

Holly's eyes flashed wide and she sat up, both unconscious reactions as she took him in. He knew that look, or imagined it had been on his face often enough when he was a kid. That knee-jerk moment of awe when you see someone who looks like the people on TV; manicured people with money and three piece suits, people whose jobs where like titles, proudly printed on business cards. People you knew existed, didn't seem like a part of real life.

Growing up, Frederick had dreamed of being one of those people. By most of his superficial thirteen-year-old standards, he had succeeded.

"Miss Swenson? I hope you don't mind if we talk for a bit. I'm Dr. Chilton."

"Another doctor? They already did all that stuff." She groaned, even doing a bit of the full body pout he now associated with Maggie. She held up her hand. "They scraped metal things under my nails, and took my clothes and shoes. The tall *stupid* one rubbed a Q-tip inside my mouth, like what was that even for? I didn't bite the guy."

Her speech was rapid-fire, with a staccato diction one rarely found in shy people. She moved her arms animatedly as she spoke, rolling her eyes and head as she put special emphasis on *stupid.*

Frederick clasped his folio in front of him. "Please tell me the tall stupid one had black hair, rather poufy."

"Eh, yeah?"

He nodded, making sure she saw the laugh he wasn't trying too hard to suppress. "That was probably Agent Zeller."

She tossed her head and made a rude noise, hands flying. "Okay, so get this. He tells me I can call him *Zee* and talked to me like I was a five the whole time, like 'Oh boo-hoo, I'm gonna start balling if some adult doesn't tell me it's gonna be okay every second.' Then him and the other one—the older guy was better, 'cause he kind of gave me a look every time Zeller said 'It's gonna be okay,' like he was making fun of him—so they started doing stuff but didn't tell me what any of it was for. Aren't doctors supposed to talk while they're doing stuff, tell you what this is for and that's for? Why did I have to give them all my clothes? My friggin' *best* hoodie I bought with my own money. And why did they take *my* blood? I'm not the freak who tried to grab someone. Go stick a needle in that guy's arm."

Well that was unexpected. After his brief encounter with Mrs. McKenna, he had expected to find a timid kid who had been properly beaten down by parental apathy. A kid who couldn't or wouldn't answer questions because she had learned the hard way that adults demanding answers were usually just looking for more rope to hang you with. Mrs. McKenna certainly struck him as the 'Tell me the truth so I can punish you more' type.

He was getting off track. “Miss Swenson, I’m gl—”

“So what now? Where’s all your stuff?”

“My stuff?”

“Yeah, your doctor bag or whatever. You don’t need to take blood again, do you? I hate needles.”

“No, I’m not that type of doctor. I’m a psychiatrist.”

“Oh.” And just like that, her expression closed and her arms went tightly around the purple creature. “They sent you up to study me or something. Think I’m lying, right? Think I made all this up and now everyone’s pissed because there’s cops and FBI people doing a bunch of stuff for no reason. Whatever. What*ever!* Go ahead and think I’m lying. Just wait until the douchebag grabs someone else, then everyone’ll know I was telling the truth. They’ll find some dead girl somewhere covered in potting soil and garden crap, and I’ll be right there like ‘I told you so.’”

Potting soil? He couldn’t ask. If he went into interrogation mode now he would lose everything.

“I’m not here to study *you*, Miss Swenson.” He looked around for a chair, but got only a cube shaped footstool of the sort that had storage room inside. He tossed his coat over it and plopped down, opening his folio and clicking his pen to the ready. “I study serial killers.”

The words had their desired effect. Her light blue eyes went wide and her lips parted in that combination of horror and fascination he had seen so many times. Horror and fascination; wasn’t that why he had entered the field? He was just as guilty.

“Shut up.”

“I’m sorry?”

“*Shut up*, you do what!?”

“I’m the director of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.” He waved his pen like it was a mere detail they could ignore. “I study serial killers and other violent manifestations of personality disorder. But it is *so rare* to get firsthand accounts from survivors. As soon as I got the call about tonight’s incident, I rushed out from a party and demanded they let me speak with you.” Yes, a white lie, but one that showed how important she was, how people were willing to upend themselves for her. And more importantly, how he did not work for the police.

“Hold on. Survivor? You think the guy who jumped me tonight was a freakin’ *serial killer*?!” She hugged Purple Alien a bit tighter, but the fascination had not left her face. Human beings were strange animals.

Frederick nodded, making his expression suitably grave. “Mmm, yes. I can’t go into detail because the police have their precious procedures, but they have very good reason to believe

the man who attacked you tonight is the same killer they have been tracking for months now."

"Holy crap! That's why the FBI showed up. I knew that was weird, like why wasn't it just the regular cop— Oh my god, wait!" She leaned forward, her little fist sinking into the mattress in front of her. "Is it that wacko who's been leaving people all over Baltimore? Like, chopping off their legs and stuff? It is, isn't it? Holy shit!"

She cupped a hand over the last word, but holy shit was right. He hadn't planned to go into that much detail, hoping that the general allusion to a serial killer would be enough to fascinate and encourage her to talk. Jack wouldn't be pleased.

Fuck Jack.

"Well, I can't really say…" He tapped his pen and rolled his gaze up to the ceiling dramatically, as good as a yes. Holly snickered and put a finger over her lips. Confidence, trust. He had told her something she wasn't supposed to know. They were in cahoots now.

"But, as I said," he continued, doing his best eager academic, "it's quite rare to speak to someone who, well, can still be spoken to." He winced. "So, this is real boon for me. I should ask up front. Can I cite you by name in any future publications? I can use a different name, if you prefer, but—"

"You're gonna write about me?!" Her face lit up as if that was the greatest thing she had ever heard. Poor kid. "Yeah, you can use my name."

Of course he was writing nothing, and would never cite a living minor by name regardless of consent. A gray lie this time. He was trying to keep them to a minimum, considering she had been lied to quite enough already.

"You want to ask the same questions they already did?" She slumped a bit. "I already told them I can't describe his face."

"No, no. I specifically *don't* want to ask questions." That seemed to confuse her. "Questions cause bias by their very nature; how they're worded, the asker's tone. The subject of a question implies what the asker considers important or not. I don't care what the police find important, I want to know what stood out to *you.* I just want to hear your story." He cringed inside. It sounded like something Freddie Lounds would say.

"Yeah, right. You just want me to tell you something about what he looked like. Mr. Crawford asked like twenty different ways, as if I'm gonna magically see something I didn't just because he asks different. It was a white guy, definitely an adult but not super old. That's it."

"Almost no one in my hospital was captured on a physical description. They're useless unless they match someone the police already suspect, and right now they have nothing. It's why they're…" He looked toward the window. "They're getting a bit desperate."

"Oh." That seemed to soften her again, no doubt the reality began to sink in. "Okay."

“I’ll be taking notes, but try to ignore that. The agents will be working a while yet, so we have all the time you need. Let’s start earlier today, so we can see the big picture. You’re off from school right now. What did you do after you woke up?”

She hesitated, as if she couldn’t believe he actually wanted her to talk about her hum drum morning. But soon enough he was listening to the grand saga of Madison, who just got a 4K Ultra big screen *and* a blue-ray player, and said she could come over and watch movies. Which led to Madison’s cousin Brian—*“a Senior and a total freakin’ jerk*”—gloating on snapchat about how his parents were going to some big company Christmas party, so he had the house to himself until well after midnight and was having people over.

“Ah, so you were at this Brian’s party."

Holly went wide-eyed. “Um… Okay, do you *have* to tell anyone that? I mean, it doesn’t help with any of this, right?”

“I don’t have to tell your mother anything.” He scribbled a note about Madison’s cousin Brian, underlining ‘*Snapchat - public posts?’*

“But you have to tell Mr. Crawford and the other guy, don’t you? They’ll just tell my mom.” She flopped back, leaning against the wall beside the window. “We weren’t even doing anything. We ate pizza and messed around with the sword-fighting game on Brian’s old Wii, but my Mom has this crazy idea in her head that I’m gonna mess around with some guy and get pregnant. Freakin’ gross, I’m fourteen. This isn’t the 90s.”

¡Ay Dios! Frederick belted laugh, more shocked than amused, followed by a fit of coughing.

“Are you okay?”

“I just have a bit of a cold.” He now regretted sitting on his coat and trapped handkerchief. The jittery effects of the cold medicine were wearing off fast, if the growing pressure in his head was any indication. “So, you were at this party playing games...”

After that she admitted, rather defiantly, that she had stayed with her friends a good hour past curfew, but wasn’t too worried because her mom didn’t call or text. Another reason to be less than happy with Mrs. McKenna. The more he thought about it, the longer that list got. She had then walked back with Madison, because her house was on the way, and on home alone after that. As she got closer to describing the moment of the attack, Holly grew somber.

“I was wearing my headphones, the silver cat ear ones my grandma sent for my birthday. I don’t know what happened to them. I guess they’re on the ground outside somewhere.” She reached up and touched the side of her neck, drawing Frederick’s eye to the small band-aid he hadn’t noticed. “I was walking, listening to music, and I got to where the neighbor’s wooden fence stops. There’s this narrow space between their fence and the next one, this old chain length fence. No one lives in that house. I’m not sure if it’s really abandoned or what, but that’s where I meet Mocha most of the time. He comes through a hole in the chain fence and then down the little empty space. I was whistling for him, I had a plastic bag with pepperoni and sausage stuff from the pizza.”

Her cheeks were flushed now, her blue eye starting to swim.

Frederick scooted to the edge of the stool. “Mocha,” He said softly. “He’s a stray dog?”

“Mocha is *my* dog!” She cried, grabbing Purple Alien and smacking it back down in her lap. “He was *our* dog, then Dad lost his job or quit, I don’t know. They don’t tell kids shit! So we had to move from the other house and this stupid place wanted extra money every month for having a dog. Mom said we couldn’t afford it so she gave him away, but you know what?” She leaned forward, her teary eyes blazing. “She didn’t give him away. She left him at the old house in the back yard! One of my friends said she saw him and I walked back over and he was there, in the freakin’ back yard with no food or anything! I let him out, but Mom says he’s not ours anymore and she just acts like he doesn’t exist. He stays around the garage at that abandoned house and I bring food and stuff, but I don’t get allowance. I just babysit for the lady next door sometimes, and that’s not a lot of money, you know? And he’s old, like nine, and…and I...”

She swallowed hard and turned away, wiping angrily at her face. Frederick wrote it all down, as much to occupy the silence as to maintain it. If they were having a session, he would have ended it there, given her the remainder of the time to think and collect herself. But this wasn’t a session and she wasn’t his patient. She was a target, whose best protection was going to be the FBI catching the Horseman.

“Holly.” He prodded, as gently as he could. “Holly, what happened to the side of your neck?”

Her hand went there again. “I didn’t feel it. I stopped where the fences change and, eh, I was pulling the plastic bag out of my pocket. Then he hit me, like, ran into me from the side. There was a white van parked on the side of the street, he must have been hiding behind it. He pushed me up against the wooden fence, and I thought, um…” She looked away again. “I thought it was gonna be a...a rape, you know? He was all squishing me against the fence, but I guess he was just trying to hold me still. The FBI guys said it was probably a needle.” She rubbed her finger over the band-aid. “It’s a really thin scratch, like from the tip of a needle.”

Frederick nodded, writing. She seemed to have forgotten he was there.

“He had his hand over my mouth, and I know, I *know* his hands smelled like gardening. We have a greenhouse at school, and that whole side of the science wing smells like potting soil and that plant food water they get from the compost heaps. He smelled *just like that.*” She rubbed around her mouth, the motion growing firmer as if she was trying to wipe the memory of his hand away. “Then he yelled and fell down. Mocha was there and he had the guy by the hand. I don’t even know how Mocha got up to his hand. Maybe the guy fell first and then he bit him, I don’t know. But he was down on his knees and Mocha was snarling and biting his hand bad. He’s never done that before. Ever. He’s a sweetheart; he never even growled or snapped when someone stepped on his tail.”

Frederick smiled. “He sounds like a good dog.”

“Yeah.” She sniffed, fingering the curtain again. “Hey, eh, the guy was wearing rubber boots too. Yellow ones, like you see in movies with the yellow rain coat and all that. But who

actually has those and wears them? Old fisherman? I've never seen anyone with a yellow raincoat in real life."

Frederick gasped, but luckily the action caused another fit of coughs to cover it. "But he— Excuse me. He wasn't wearing gloves?" Did Will know that? He wrote it down.

She shook her head. "Maybe he had a glove on his other hand, but not the one over my mouth. But that would be weird, right? One glove? It was dark, there's no street light over there, but— Oh! You know what? He *was* big. Not like super tall, but big the way some guys are." She held her elbows out away from her body, miming as if she had a barrel chest. "'Cause he was down on the sidewalk trying to get away from Mocha and he filled it up, like he was almost as wide as the sidewalk, if that makes any sense. And he *knew me."*

"Knew you?" Of course he did. The Horseman was selecting them from parentage, after all, but how could she know that. "He spoke to you?"

She nodded, eyes wide as if she too just realized it. Maybe she had. "When he put his hand over my mouth, I heard him say Swenson. Not like a question, like he was asking who I was, but more like, um..." She wiggled her hands in front of her, thinking.

"More like an accusation? Like your name was a bad thing?"

"No, more like my home room teacher taking attendance. Just 'Swenson'." She deadpanned the name in a caricature of a man's voice. "Like the way people say numbers when they're counting. Or reading a list. He didn't even sound mad."

Something cold crawled down Frederick's spine. He chose to believe it was the flu. Remembering the role he was playing, he scribbled down the details as if was the most fascinating thing he'd ever heard. It wasn't, but damned close. Calm and emotionless was not how he had perceived the Horseman. The fact he was killing people he deemed guilty, or at least killing them to punish their guilty fathers, spoke to righteous rage. The manner in which the victims had been mutilated, their limbs viciously hacked off rather than carefully amputated, didn't suggest someone with cold detachment. It didn't make sense.

Or it doesn't make sense to me, he thought bitterly. It would hardly be the first time he was wrong.

"Mocha's okay, right?" She pulled the curtain back to look down on the street. "They said he was, but I didn't see. I ran. I didn't try to help him."

"You couldn't help him," he assured her, closing the folio on his lap. "You're safe because you ran, you made the right choice. I didn't see him when I arrived, but if they said he's alright I'm sure he is. The techs are hoping to get a blood sample from his teeth that will help them identify your attacker."

"You mean the killer. Might as well say it, since I know." She closed the curtain and faced him as if to say something else, but stopped. Her brow scrunched up in thought before she bounded to the other end of the bed and retrieved a phone plugged into a charger. She started swiping quickly at the screen.

Shit.

"Holly, I'm not sure if posting anything about this right now would be a good idea. We should see what Agent Crawford wa—"

"I knew I remembered this! One of Brian's friends was talking about it. All those people they found down in Baltimore were related to serial killers. That's like the whole thing, see?" She turned the phone around and, sure enough, it was a headline in a news app linking to Tattlecrime.com.

Sins of the Fathers!

Horseman Killer Strikes Again on John Hopkins Campus!

Freddie Lounds.

Freddie *fucking* Lounds.

"Alright. That is part of what's going on, yes, but—"

"So it can't be the same guy, because he's going after serial killers' kids. See? It's just some creep. Well, I mean he was definitely going to do something bad, so still pretty high up there on the creep scale, no matter what. Right?" She made a noise like a laugh, but it died quickly, no doubt from the look on his face.

He should stop now. She had said everything there was to say and he had gotten some good information, so the best thing to do would be to assure her she was probably right. It was just a regular, run of the mill *non* serial killer, which didn't sound like much of an improvement until one brought in this issue of her father. She had called the step-father Dad, after all, so— No, her last name was Swenson, not McKenna. She already knew the man downstairs wasn't her biological father, even if she did call him Dad. So her mother must have made up some different story.

A story that was now dead.

A story that was going to be meaningless as soon as Freddie Lounds and the rest of media learned about tonight and started posting their stories, soon to go viral.

Frederick cupped a hand over his tired eyes, dragging it down his face. There was no point in lying. A cover-up never had a chance.

He set his folio on the little desk nearby, scooting the stool forward. "Holly, there are some things that are going to become public very soon, and I think you have a right to find out in a better way than reading it on some vulgar blog."

Her expression fell, the phone slipping down into her lap. "Yeah?"

"What do you know about your father? Your biological father?"

She frowned at him, the chess pieces in her head already moving. "He died in a car crash before I was born."

Of all the possible stories she could have been given, it was by far one of the laziest. Damn it, he didn't want to be doing this. Giving horrible news to victims and their families, that was Crawford's job. It was even Will's job before it was his! But she had a right to know the truth, and he doubted Mrs. McKenna was going to come clean now. She would probably tell her daughter to shut up and act like none of this was happening, all while the world and every person she knew screamed the truth at her from four different social media platforms. And her school, all of her classmates...

Jesus Christ, the poor kid was ruined.

Frederick drew a deep breath. "Holly, your father's name is Philip Swenson, and he didn't die in a car accident. He is in prison in Pennsylvania."

"No." She shook her head, cheeks reddening. "No, my Dad's name was *Paul* Swenson, and he died in a car crash. My Mom said."

"I'm sorry."

"No, that's not—It must be someone else!" But even as she said it he could see she knew. He had no reason to lie. The FBI had no reason to waste their time. And he imagined a childhood conveniently empty of photos and stories about her father was enough to fill in the rest.

She drew up her knees, burying her face behind her arms. Frederick shifted in his awkward seat, unsure what to do. What if this had been a mistake? What the hell had he done?

"He killed people?" Her words were barely more than a gurgle through her arms and tears.

Frederick, you damn fool. "Yes."

"A lot?"

"You shouldn't think about—"

"A lot!?"

"Yes." If he didn't tell her, she would look it up, which would be far worse. "Nineteen. That they know of."

"Oh god..."

Silence followed, and he let it. What could he say? What could anyone say to soften such a blow? He could only guess what she must be thinking, about her mother, about how close she had come to dying. About herself.

"Holly, listen to me. This doesn't change anything about you."

"Yeah, sure."

"Look at me. Holly?" He waited until she raised her head, incredulous eyes daring him to challenge all the bad thoughts she was already thinking. Maybe he was about to do something even more stupid than he already had. Maybe he was taking his 'treat them like adults' ethos too far, but so be it. It was better than the alternative.

"I'm a doctor, and studying men like your f—like Philip Swenson is what I do. Monsters like him and the man who attacked you tonight don't form out of thin air. The signs are there, much earlier than people would like to admit. Lack of empathy, cruelty to animals, emotional manipulation. You..."

He darted his eyes around the room, the messy space scattered with stuffed animals and big headed figurines. Drawings she had obviously made covered a cork board, along with a few pictures of her hugging friends. He stood and walked to the desk, picking up an open pad of paper with one of the cartoons in progress.

"Holly, you bring pizza toppings to a dog you take care of by yourself. Your room is full of stuffed animals." He laughed, hoping it was contagious. "I work with psychopaths every day and you just don't fit the bill."

She let out a watery laugh and rubbed her sleeve across her face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. But, there might be people—some serious, some who think they're being funny—who will suggest that because there is something wrong with your father, there must be something wrong with you. That is nonsense. Any talk of genes, genetics, blood, it's all nonsense. After all, I very much doubt someone hiding a vicious anti-social personality disorder would be drawing...eh..." He examined the cartoon again, which appeared to be of two little boys hugging, one of them looking startled while the other had pink heart eyes. He read the scribble at the bottom. "Drawing whatever 'Destiel' is."

"Oh my god, give me that!" She sprung up to snatch the pad, which he handed over with a laugh.

"I don't think psychopaths draw heart eyes. I've never read of an instance."

"Shut up, jeez." She shoved the pad under a pillow and plopped back down next to it for good measure. "Okay, I get it, but people are going to say it. My Mom's gonna be pissed you told me."

"A particularly obnoxious reporter I know of is probably outside as we speak taking pictures. A day or two at most and this will be on the news. You need to be prepared."

"How?"

Touché. "You really can't, it's just something people say."

She snorted at that. "Uh-huh. Did I help, though? I mean, is anything I said useful?"

"I think so, yes." He could see her starting to droop, and she wasn't the only one. If he didn't get home soon he might not make it there. He picked up his coat and rifled a business card

from the breast pocket. This was probably a bad idea too, but wasn't that his life now? Frederick Chilton's series of idiotic events. He handed her the card.

"Your number?"

"Things are going to get difficult for a while. If you need to talk or if you have questions, you can call me."

"But don't you study *serial killers*?" She narrowed her eyes, but not convincingly. He laughed.

"I do have some regular patients, thank you." He pulled on his coat, adjusting his cuffs to their proper place. And maybe he played up the fussiness a bit, which she seemed to find amusing. "But if the FBI wants you to speak to one of their trauma counselors, you should."

She looked at the card for a second before tucking it into the pocket flap of her phone case. "I'd rather talk to you."

He was going to pretend that didn't please him as much as it did. "Alright. Thank you for talking to me. Agent Crawford or Mr. Graham might come up to speak to you again. The FBI *is* sorely lacking in personality, but try to cut them a little slack."

She snickered, another confidence between them. With a final smile, he grabbed his folio and opened the door.

"Oh, wait! Wait a sec." She went to the stool he had been sitting on and lifted the lid. She pulled out what looked like a bundle of red ribbon or rope. "Can you do something for me? Please, I know it's a giant hassle, but my mom won't, and I don't know what those FBI guys are going to do when they're done." She looked unsure, eyes pleading. "I don't know what else to do."

Frederick's stomach flipped and a renewed flush prickled his skin. Tomorrow was going to be rough.

He closed the door again. "What do you need?"

****

"The hell is he doing up there? It's been almost an hour."

"It's been twenty-five minutes."

Jack glanced at his watch and scowled at the confirmation. Will shifted next to the stairs, stretching his neck with no hope of alleviating the granite tension he had managed to work up. He had heard yelling a few times, Holly's high voice making it down the stairs for a few words before going inaudible again. She had been yelling about the dog.

"Where's the dog?"

“Don’t worry about the dog.”

Will gave a rueful laugh, mostly at himself. “What do you expect me to do?”

Jack softened a little at that. “Techs are finished with it. They had to administer a sedative to get the tooth scrapings, so it’s probably still asleep in the van.”

“And after?”

“Parents say the dog isn’t theirs.” He lowered his voice further, though it probably wasn’t necessary under the blaring cover of the living room TV. The step-father was watching some cable news show, faces coated in pancake makeup giving him his daily dose of misdirected rage. “We got reports from the neighbors that the dog is a regular stray around here. The girl’s been seen bringing it food.”

A stray. Which meant the local cops would drop it at the nearest shelter, end of problem. There were a few places in Virginia he knew to be no-kill. There was also one large white house in Baltimore he knew to be yes-omelet .

Jack looked amused. “I don’t know if your hotel manager will be thrilled with you showing up with a dog.”

“He won't be.”

The thump of steps saved him from having to elaborate. Frederick appeared at the bottom of the stairs, his leather folio open as he tore out a sheet of legal paper. His face was shiny with heat and the space under his eyes had taken on a grayish hue. The paper shook as he handed it to Will.

“He was wearing yellow rubber boots. He’s big, but not fat. Broad-chested, probably strong. He smelled like potting soil and plant food. Miss Swenson is familiar with both from her school, and she was quite adamant on the fact—“ He twisted away into a horrible wet cough.

Jack snatched the paper from Will, his eyes running over the tight cursive script. “Snapchat. You think he might have been stalking her social media accounts?”

Will hesitated, thinking the question was for Frederick, but Jack was looking at him. “It would be an easy way to track someone’s movements. People don’t think twice about posting their whereabouts publicly.”

“And handing themselves to anyone on a platter.” Jack cursed under his breath, looking at the paper again. “I’ll have intel look at her accounts, her phone, see what she or anyone associated with her online might have posted tonight about this…'party at Brian’s.'”

“Party? I fucking knew it.” Mrs. McKenna appeared in the kitchen entrance, her non-phone hand on one hip. “So who the hell is Brian? The boyfriend she insists she doesn’t have? Out almost to midnight on Christmas Even with some little—“

“*That’s* what you care about?” Frederick snapped back around. “Your daughter was a hair’s breadth away from being kidnapped and butchered tonight, but you care about her curfew and

a party?"

"Fuckin' *excuse* you? Who the hell are you to come in here and talk to—"

"Why is your daughter's last name Swenson?"

She flinched, the question seeming to act like a static shock. "Excuse me?"

"Doctor, I think if you're done here it might be best to—"

"I said," Frederick continued, ignoring Jack as his gray face turned an ominous gray-pink, "why is your daughter's name Swenson? She was born after your divorce and your ex-husband's conviction for multiple murders. In fact, I find it unlikely anyone would have batted an eye if you had put 'unknown father' on the birth certificate, but no, you named her Holly *Swenson*. She's fourteen now, not much longer until college admissions, driver's licenses. She's going to need that birth certificate, and she's going to see that her father's name is not, and never was, *Paul."*

Mrs. McKenna snapped her arm toward the door. "Get out."

Jack moved forward. "Doctor, I think it's best if—"

"I'll tell you what I think." Frederick let out a manic laugh, or a fevered one. Damn, he looked bad. "I think you gave your daughter a monster's name because you wanted to separate her from you. You wanted to mark her so if she turned out bad or a disappointment, you could wash your hands of responsibility. After all, she's *his* daughter, right? You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I said get out."

"You can't punish him, so you'll punish her—"

"Get the *fuck out*! Now! Brett!"

"What the hell is going on in there?" Mr. McKenna sounded more exasperated than concerned.

"Okay, you're done here, doctor." Jack's expression could have boiled water.

"I most certainly am." Frederick sniffed as he brushed past, puffy red nose in the air. He closed the front door behind him with a soft click, which was somehow more insulting than a slam.

Will moved as if to go after him, then stopped. What was he planning to do? Comfort him? Scold him? Congratulate him on saying what he and Jack could not?

"How dare you bring that jackass in my house! What did he tell her, huh? Did he tell her?!"

Will did his best to shut out the tirade while Jack made conciliatory grumbles. When that didn't work, the grumbles turned threatening.

"With all due respect, you need to accept the reality of what is happening here. Any obstruction to our investigation or security measures is only going to put your daughter in further danger and make your family a media target."

Jack continued until Mrs. McKenna began to visibly shrink, outlining how things were going to go from now on. The police presence, surveillance. Holly would likely not be able to return to school if the killer was still at large by then. Then the death blow; she would have to come in for questioning about her Philip Swenson. The attempt on Holly meant she fit the Horseman's requirements of a target, the requirements Will had yet to figure out. What was it about Holly, about Philip Swenson, about the others that made them different from the near countless number of serial-killer descents available?

With Jack still putting Mrs. McKenna in her new place, Will saw his chance and slipped outside. That he didn't see Frederick at the bottom of the steps wasn't surprising. No doubt he had freed himself from the circus as fast as influenza and exhaustion would allow. He rubbed a hand across his face, a surge of guilt and gratitude making his empty stomach flop.

Hopefully Frederick's indulgences would extend to another houseguest.

He stepped out into the street between two of the CSU vans and looked down in the direction of the crime scene focus, the area of sidewalk and fence where Holly said she had been attacked. He continued that way, coming around another van to look inside the open back. Jimmy stood next to the shield of the open door, leaning in close as Zee, who knelt in the bed of the van, spoke close to his ear. Jimmy smiled at whatever he heard, but bounced away with a start when his eyes met Will's.

"Will," Zee said, a bit loudly. "How's it going in there?"

If those two thought they were being subtle, it was only because Jack had yet to see what was going on. Though why they bothered the hide anything was unclear. The FBI's fraternization policy was practically nonexistent. Then again, the homophobia of FBI culture was definitely existent.

He pretended to see nothing. "Better and worse. Weren't you processing the dog?"

"Yeah, finished." Zee slapped the plastic container at his side. "Tooth scrapings, nails, even got a sample from his nasal cavity, but I'm not that optimistic."

Jimmy made a sound of agreement. "No visible blood left that we could see. I think he might have eaten something after he attacked our guy."

A line from Frederick's notes jumped out at him. "Pizza toppings."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Where the dog now?"

"Oh, you've just missed him." Jimmy motioned toward the opposite end of the street.

"Local police have him?" If he could catch them before they left...

"No." Zee shook his head, confused. "Chilton took him."

"What?" He craned his neck to see down the darkened street, which didn't have the benefit of the flood lights at that end.

"Yeah, he said he...Whoa, wait, was he not supposed to take him?" Zee stepped out of the van, worry seeping into his voice.

"No, it's fine. Thanks." Will set off down the street past the vans and idling cops. There, on the sidewalk not far from the police line, stood Frederick. He held a thin red leash going down to a scrawny long-haired dog. The height and shape suggested a golden retriever mix of some kind, but the poor thing was definitely underweight. It also wasn't moving.

The dog had sat himself in the snow, his head slumped down almost to his chest. Frederick was bent over, rubbing a gloved hand across the back of the dog's neck and looking like he was three seconds from panic.

"What's wrong?" Frederick crooned, or whined. "Come on, we have to keep walking to the car."

"Frederick."

He gave a start, looking guiltier than Jimmy had. "Ah. Will. I'm just, eh..."

"You have the dog."

"I have the dog."

"Why do you have the dog?"

"If you must know, I am doing a small favor for Miss Swenson." He coughed, cleared his throat, and gave a dog another panicked look. "But he sat down and now he won't move."

"I think he's still down from the drugs. Here." Will leaned down to look into a pair of glassy brown eyes on a face that reminded him terribly of Winston. Stepping to the side, he curled an arm across the dog's chest and the other under his rump to lift him. He was far lighter than he should be. "Where did you park?"

Frederick piled the leash into Will's arms and lead the way, hugged his coat around him. They cleared the police line, where more than a few people gave them curious looks, and crossed the street to the next one over. Frederick's car stuck out like an antique thumb under the street lamp.

"You're taking in a dog as a favor to someone you met half an hour ago." He already knew the answer, which why he didn't phrase it as a question.

"No, I am not 'taking in a dog.' Miss Sw—Holly was worried that he might end up in a shelter that performs euthanasia. I'm just going to find one that doesn't and I'll take him there. Tomorrow." Frederick fumbled with his keys and sniffed, or tried to. He was completely congested again.

"Tomorrow is Christmas."

"The day after then."

Will placed the dog gently on his feet next to the car. He was chocolate brown with sparse streaks almost cream in color. No wonder he had been named Mocha. "Sure."

"I'm already allowing your hairy acquisition to ruin my furniture." He opened the passenger door.

"Of course."

"And my car. I'm going to have to have it detailed again. This dog is *filthy*."

"Sorry about that." He pressed his lips against a vision of Frederick cursing in Spanish as he gave Mocha a bath. But the amusement faded when he remembered Frederick absolutely should not do that.

As if to bolster the thought, Frederick braced a hand against the car roof and swayed.

"Maybe you shouldn't drive back. Jack can release some people to take you and follow with your car."

Frederick made an ugly sound. "Oh, thank you, but no. I've already had my experience with the FBI chauffer service."

Will pressed his lips harder. *Stop, that's not funny.*

"And I hate the idea of anyone driving my car."

"You were okay with me driving your car."

"Was I, though?" Frederick shot back, his voice dripping with so much sarcasm Will could no longer hold back. He burst out laughing. It grew until he had his face tilted up the street light, his shoulders shaking. In the back of his mind he could still hear Frederick's indignant *"Where is my car!?"*

"Glad I amuse you." The words had no bite. Frederick was smiling now too, shifting his eyes around as if he didn't know where to look. He seemed to snap himself out of something, and reached down to help Mocha into the front seat. Will brushed past him to pick the dog up and set him inside. He slumped against the cool leather, not even reacting when Will closed the door.

They came around to the driver's side and Frederick slipped in. He hesitated. "I didn't ruin things back there, did I? They aren't going to stop cooperating now?"

"Jack's putting the fear of God and State into them, so I doubt it. By the way..." He nodded slowly, impressed. "Nice."

Frederick huffed a laugh and shoved the keys in the ignition. Before he could shut the door, though, Will just couldn't resist: "Should I stop for more eggs on my way back?"

Frederick made a disgusted sound and slammed the door on him, sneering through the glass like the closeted dog-lover he was. The engine roared to life and he took off, all to the sound of Will's laughter.

Christmas Day

Chapter Notes

First, I really wanted to get this up before going to bed tonight, so I skipped my usual 4th (or 8th) read through. There's probably some typos somewhere, oh well.

Second, acknowledgements are called for! I would like to thank Rick_Sanchez for giving me such a cool idea in the comments all the way back in chapter 7. You'll know it when you see it ;)

And finally, as always, the word count for this chapter: 5,001

Philip Swenson.

Ugh. Maybe she would skip doing his profile for the print edition. The sexual sadists left a particularly bad taste in her mouth, and, considering she covered literal cannibals, that was quite a statement. There was something about a serial killer taking *that* kind of pleasure in his crimes that took them to a level of depravity even she found hard to stomach. It seemed somehow—and she knew it made no logical sense—less pure. Philip Swenson was nothing but a glorified rapist. A woman hating neck-beard who had gotten an elevation he didn't deserve just because he tortured his victims while violating them. Woopdi-fucking-do.

Hope you're enjoying the broom handles at Greene Correctional, you sick fuck.

"I guess gross pictures of crime scenes are more interesting than us."

Freddie lifted her eyes from the phone and leveled her worst smile at her dip-shit of a step-brother. "Not everyone."

"Freddie..." The smiling chastisement, always followed by a defusing little nose laugh, came from the open French doors leading into the kitchen. Her mother, just shy of fifty and still looking like a well preserved 40, clacked into the room on her open-toed heels. She fussed with a few of the trays on the coffee table, picking up a few salmon covered crackers Freddie knew she wouldn't eat. She needed a domestic excuse to enter the room, always, some wifely reason to be there because doing anything from your own proactive volition wasn't safe. Not when you had built your entire life around pleasing your dickwad rich husband.

That was Lorna Rosen, née Lounds. The perpetual smiling people pleaser. The ginger beauty of Binghamton, who played her looks and helplessness like a concert pianist. The woman who had said it was 'understandable' and 'made sense' when her husband, the man who had been Freddie's step-father since she was eleven, had made it painfully clear that he wouldn't be helping out with college tuition for a kid that wasn't actually his.

Ryan popped another salmon cracker in his mouth, slapping the dust from his hands. "One hell of a *profession* you've got there, Fred. How many murder investigations have you obstructed this week?"

"Less than the number of life saving surgeries you've denied claims for, would be my guess." Damned if that silver-spoon little shit was going to look down on her. *Insurance adjusters.* At least Lecter had to decency to eat people after causing their deaths.

Dear old dad, AKA Kenneth, lowered his pink copy of the Financial Times just long enough to give her the stink eye. She smiled back with her best Lorna impression. If he didn't like her line of work, maybe he should have used some of that investment portfolio to send her to college. You want to toss a kid into the deep end, you don't get to judge how they stay afloat.

Ryan sneered and leaned forward, but whatever pathetic comeback he had prepared went unspoken as his two brats raced into the room. Actually, she rather liked the twins. If not for the fact they were five and hadn't yet been molded into self-important little pricks like their father, than at least because everything they did seemed to bug the hell out of him.

They also seemed to be entirely unaware of her so-called death last year.

"What did I tell you about running? And where is the other half of that? It better not be lying out in the snow." Ryan got up to hassle his children about the toys they held, liberated pieces of plastic from the mound of wrapping paper that had covered the den that morning. Or, had covered it for barely ten minutes before her mother cleared it all away.

When she was a kid they would keep the pile half the day, tromping through it, hiding under it, enjoying the bright crunchy proof of bounty and fun. Even if most of the gifts had been practical, or off brand trinkets from the dollar store. Freddie had never minded. Back then, she hadn't known anything was wrong, hadn't known her mother resented every moment of being working class.

Though, it wasn’t like Freddie could complain too much about that. She had learned to resent it too, eventually.

"Go find your Mom, and get out of those shoes. You're tromping snow everywhere. Julie!" Ryan shot a scowl toward the kitchen, no doubt pissed he had been forced to parent for three whole seconds.

For the tenth time that day, Freddie wondered what the hell she was doing there, especially when Mom treated her every visit like a disaster in need of containment. It was worse than usual now, since she suspected Mom hadn’t quite forgiven her for the whole fake death thing. So be it. Freddie hadn’t yet forgiven them for not coming to the funeral.

"You want to come into the kitchen and give me a hand?" Mom smiled, but the glint in her eye was unmistakable. *If you can't kiss their asses, get away from them.*

Freddie hauled herself off the sofa and headed for the kitchen. At least there was wine in there.

"Careful with that phone of yours!" Ryan called after her. "I don't want the boys getting hold of it and seeing any of that crap you print."

If those boys didn't see *Walking Dead* reruns on a regular basis, she was the Queen of Sheba. Freddie waved a dismissive hand behind her and entered her mother's Martha Stewart wet dream. Everything was white and tasteful blond wood, real linen tea towels and dove gray dishes. Once upon a time her mother had worn jewel tones and hair scrunchies, bright dresses and batik scarves. Now, it seemed like the only thing left her mother hadn't bleached was her hair.

"Do you have to prod them like that?" She whispered over the ham, which was already glistening from the last two coats of glaze.

"Do I have to defend myself when they mock my career? Yeah."

"Career." Mom shook her head, her immaculate red waves not moving an inch. "Are you even trying to break into real journalism anymore? Did you ever call that PR firm in DC? Kenneth knows a few people there, he's willing to put in a good word."

"How generous." Freddie snatched a bottle of white off the counter and pulled off the stupid novelty stopper. "And PR is not journalism."

"You would have more time to yourself," Mom continued. "Normal work hours, none of this tramping all over the country to get photos like some paparazzi. No *faking your death.* You could actually meet someone, settle down. You would have to tone down your clothes, though. This kind of thing doesn't fly in DC."

Holy fucking shoot me now... Getting dragged out of her broken car window had been more fun than this.

As if fate was looking out for her, her phone chirped with an email notification. It was the anonymous account she had set up for confidential sources. "Excuse me."

"Don't spend the whole day buried in your phone." Mom sighed. "It's Christmas."

"I have to use the bathroom." And if *Kenneth* could spend the whole day buried in a newspaper, she could do as she damn well pleased.

She dropped down on the toilette lid in the hall bathroom and pulled out her phone, hoping she hadn't made a mistake skipping the hoopla last night. It wasn't an actual crime scene, after all, and she could get photos of the street and victim's house in Elkton from other sources. Lord knew she had more than enough images of Crawford looking surly as CSU techs worked around him. One more of those wouldn't change anything.

She let out a low whistle at the sight of the screen name, one of her FBI sources she hadn't heard from in a while. The circus over Lecter had sent most of her FBI sources dark, but this one was a ladder climbing backstabber if ever there was one. The best kind of source.

[Subject: new profiler? consultant?]

Graham called him in last night to interview vic. No details, but must have gotten something Graham and Crawford didn't. Seems pleased right? Same price as usual.

Attached below the text was a surprisingly good photo, considering it came from a phone. Freddie zoomed in, grinning at the high definition. Standing right under a street lamp—thank you Lady Luck—were Chilton and Graham. The good doctor had cleaned up his act since last she saw him. Once again he was primped and dressed to the nines, bespoke dress coat and all. They stood facing each other beside Chilton's antique Porsche, but it was not the car or Chilton's fashion sense that grabbed her. It was Graham. Broad smiling, eyes closed, head thrown back in genuine laughter, Will friggin' Graham.

"Whoa."

As if that weren't great enough—honestly, how many people on Earth had seen Will Graham smile?—there was the look on Chilton's face. Maybe it was a trick of the light. Maybe it was one of those meaningless transitional expressions that photographers sometimes catch, when an itch looks like a scowl or a deep breath looks like fear. But so what? It *looked* the way it looked, and it looked like gossip column gold.

Frederick Chilton looked downright smitten. Face upturned, brow knitted, lips pressed in a smile, round eyes utterly fixed on Graham *smitten.* If it were a cartoon, red hearts would have been floating out of his ass.

“Oh-ho-ho…” Freddie snickered and did a little shimmy dance on the toilette lid. Wasn’t this just perfect? She had been hoping for some personal angle to spice things up, a little extra sub-plot to keep her readers from getting bloody murder overload. She’d managed it pretty well after Graham’s half-assed voyage to Italy, which had practically written the Murder Husbands byline for her. Now this?

“I think you have a thing for psychiatrists, Will,” She sing-songed, knowing it was likely bullshit. Chilton wasn’t murdery enough for Graham’s bizarre tastes. She wouldn’t put it past Chilton, though. He seemed like the sort of needy idiot to fall under the spell of emo silence and GQ good looks. He was also a sucker for attention, especially when it came from a rarified direction, and there was no attention more rarified than Will Graham’s.

The no man’s land of time between Christmas and New Year’s was generally thought to be low priority in the media game, but Freddie knew better. People were off work, stuck in their houses with relatives they couldn’t stand, and nothing to entertain them but social media and Netflix. She had been planning, reluctantly, to post the story about Lecter’s kid in the morning. Free of any names, of course, just a story to make sure everyone knew that *she knew*. It could be viral by dinner time tomorrow, but maybe this was better. Yeah, something more sentimental and squishy for the holiday season.

And it served Chilton right for bailing on their book.

She sent a quick email to Paulie, telling him to hold off on the print edition until she could get last minute changes to him, then opened her paypal app. She sent the usual payment to her source, rolling her eyes at the very real on the screen. The dumbass sent her emails from a

pseud account, but used his real name on paypal. The FBI really needed to do a better job screening for idiocy.

*****

Will woke with a start, his heart pounded. He rolled over to his back, as if giving the beleaguered muscle more room to work, and listened. He could still hear Frederick's whimpering, the half slurred cries of distress, only he wasn't sure which desperate pleas he heard now. Were they the phantom echoes from his dream, or memories from the very real thrashing he had heard from Frederick's bedroom last night?

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and leaned forward, rubbing a hand over his scratchy cheek. He had made it back to Frederick's house just before dawn, letting himself in with the spare key. Despite exhaustion, he had practically leapt up the front stairs at the sound of those anguished words, *"Stop...please..."*, only to find Frederick alone and very much asleep, his hair sticking to his damp forehead and his bed looking like a fight had taken place on it.

He had almost woken him, but had changed his mind at the sight of his sunken left cheek and the false eye lens sitting in a dish on the nightstand. Will could no longer pretend to know Frederick, not after so many of his previous estimations had proven wrong, but he was sure he knew him well enough to imagine the shame and humiliation he would feel at being seen without his prosthetics.

Shuffling to the bathroom now, he looked back to the bed and corner beyond. No Maggie or Mocha. He had found both in Frederick's room last night, Maggie happily seeking his attention while Mocha cowered in a corner, tail curled in so tight it had touched his belly. He had taken both to his room, then spent almost an hour coaxing Mocha through a much needed hot bath.

It was still before noon when he made his way downstairs, grateful he had found no well-meaning Christmas invitations on his phone. Jack was still in mourning for Bella, and his friendship with Alana remained on unstable ground. Not to mention the awkwardness of them both sharing a meal with Margot.

That was pretty much everyone he knew.

Almost.

He passed through the kitchen and slowed at the sound of the TV in the next room. A woman's voice shouted *"They're cut off! Do something!"* followed by shouts and rapid gunfire. Will entered the living room like he was still asleep, like maybe his night terror had shifted into something less gruesome and more surreal. It was the only possible explanation for why Dr. Frederick Chilton was watching *Aliens*.

Aliens.

Frederick lay stretched out along the sofa, his gray sweatpants and wild hair highlighting just how ill he was. He had pulled the ottoman up against the sofa, creating an extended landscape for the collection of tissues, medicine bottles, and empty teacups. Maggie lay curled up on the opposite end of the sofa, her chin resting over one of Frederick's feet. Mocha's thin frame rested on the narrow space between Frederick and ottoman, his head resting squarely in the middle of Frederick's chest.

Frederick stroked a lazy land over Mocha's ears, and judging from the shiny smooth fur and blissful look on the dog's face, he had been doing it for a while.

Will had seen a lot of things in his time; horrible things, indescribable things. And while he—even he—couldn't imagine adequately describing the scene to anyone, it definitely was not horrible.

Not horrible at all.

The dead opposite of horrible.

What the hell…

Will swallowed hard, clearing his suddenly dry throat. "Good morning."

"'Another glorious day in the corps.'"

"What?"

Frederick laughed, the sound much closer to a giggle. "'A day in the marine corps is like a day on the farm…'"

Will moved to peer around the arm of the sofa, where Frederick had his face half buried in a pillow. "What are you talking about?"

Frederick rolled his shuttered eyes up to Will. "You don't know Aliens*?* For shame, Mr. Graham."

Will stared at him for several seconds before speaking slowly. "Why are *you* watching Aliens*?*"

"Christmas marathon." Frederick flopped a hand out onto the ottoman and grabbed a tissue. His nose was red and chapped. Will's nose itched in sympathy.

"There's a Christmas marathon of Aliens?" Will looked at the screen, where the doomed space marines were now shooting behind them as they fled the Queen's nest.

"Uh-huh." Frederick sniffed. "Supposed to be, um…ironic? Like, eh, like horror movies on Valentine's day."

Will huffed a laugh, no longer able to pretend this was normal. “I just didn't take you to be an Aliens fan.”

“This was the first movie I ever saw in the theater. I was, um…” He narrowed his eyes, thinking hard. Too hard. “Fifteen? Yeah, fifteen.” He giggled again, as if there was something hilarious about the word fifteen.

That definitely wasn't normal. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yep. Better. Not coughing anymore.” He snickered at that too. “Nooo more coughing.”

“Okay.” *Wow*. “You, eh, look a little better.”

“Pfft! I do *not*.” Frederick waved his hand, sending the tissue to the floor. He didn’t seem to notice. “I look like trash, but—but, know what? *So*? I thought earlier, when I got up, I thought, ‘Oh, don’t want Will to see me looking so crappy,’ but then I remember you’ve seen me all cut open with me gut—my organs out. Not getting much worse than that, so…Pfft!”

Holy shit.

“Are you drunk?”

Frederick gasped as if Will had just insulted his mother. "I am a *doctor,* thank you! I think I know better than to *drink* while sick." He sniffled. "Idiot."

Will came forward until he was hovering over the sofa. Frederick blinked and pushed his head back into the pillow as if trying to keep Will in focus. "W-what?"

"Frederick, I never saw you like that. You're thinking of Jack, or Freddie Lounds. They were there, I didn't go into the observatory."

Frederick did the best impression of a confused dog Will had ever seen. Then, after a few seconds of muttered false starts, his eyes shot wide. "Oh. *Oh!* Then this *is* the worst you've ever seen me." He looked down at himself in appraisal. "Ugh! Go back upstairs."

Will threw up his hands. "I don't care what you look like. I care that you're acting strangely. Did you take something?"

Frederick looked away to the TV. "I'm not coughing anymore."

Will sighed at the non-sequitur, then took a closer look at the medicinal mess covering the ottoman. There were two bottles of brightly colored over-the-counter cold medicine, but also a brown bottle covered in the fine print of a prescription label. Will picked it up, feeling it was less than half full.

"Cheratussin? There's codeine in this, how much did you take?"

"Enough." Frederick snorted a laugh, then wimped as he put a hand to his sore nose. "Um, maybe a bit too much."

Will didn't know whether to laugh or call 911. "You're high.″

"I beg your pardon!" He made as if to sit up, only to flop back down when Mocha raised a disturbed head. "I am not *high.* I might be having some, eh, some reactions. Maybe. But that's a standard pharmasudle, um, pharma—*drug* side effect!"

"Oh, yeah, your just fine."

"I had to stop coughing," he whined. "My head was killing me. And shush. You're missing the movie."

The poor pilot on the screen reached for her gun too late. The alien attacked, splattering the pilots blood against the cockpit window and sending the spacecraft careening toward the ground.

Frederick made a distressed sound and sank back against the sofa. "Oh. I don't remember that being so bad."

"Because you've seen the real thing now," Will muttered. There was a reason he hadn't seen a horror movie in long time. He waved the prescription bottle. "You're not taking any more of this."

Frederick made a face, but voiced no objection. He went back to petting Mocha, and looking like the dictionary definition of pouting. "I want coffee."

Will cupped a hand over mouth, stifling a groan. Or a laugh. He headed toward the kitchen. "You should have water instead. Or orange juice."

Frederick rolled his head back on the armrest until he was looking at Will upside down. "'It won't make any difference.'"

This time he didn't bother to stifle the laugh. "How many times have you seen this?"

Frederick hummed something like *'I don't know'* and tucked his face back into the pillow, making his next words barely audible. "Thank you. For giving him a bath."

"Sure."

"He was dis*gusting.″*

Will smirked. "And he seems to be making himself quite at home."

"Shut up."

He left Frederick to the sound of Bill Paxton declaring how fucked they all were and went into the kitchen. He had no problem using the electric kettle or the French press, two facts he felt oddly compelled to shove in Frederick's face. As he waited for the water to boil and the grounds to steep, he took a moment to view the room in a way he had no yet seen. The sun yet to clear the top edge of the ceiling high windows, and the cloudless winter day filled the

kitchen with bright yellow light. Stark beams created rectangles on the floor, and bounced off the white surfaces until the very walls seemed to radiate warmth.

Viewed for the first time, or at the wrong time, the house was hallow and bland. Will's first impression had been of an art gallery in need of exhibits, but maybe Frederick preferred this painting, done in warm yellows—

Ding...dong! ding-dong-ding-dong-ding-dong!

The sound of the doorbell being pressed like a jackhammer cut through the house, followed by the distinct sound of laughter and voices. Will ducked out into the hall where he could see the shadows of two people in the frosted glass of the front door. The bell went off again, four staccato presses, then more laughter as the shadows turned tail and ran.

"What the hell?" Will ran for the door.

"What?" Frederick called, sounding confused and a little nervous. "What's going on?"

"Stay there!" Will reached the door and yanked it open. He wasn't really expecting a threat, not from giggling blurs that appeared to be a head shorter than him, but he was at least prepared for vandalism or a prank. What he was not prepared for was a large gift bag covered in Christmas trees and silver snowflakes.

He spotted the dark blonde head of a young woman as she dove into the open back door of a beat-up white sedan. A young black woman—no, definitely a kid—wore a big laughing smile as she slid around the car and threw herself into the passenger seat. There were two other people in the car too, but there was no chance to make them out as it skidded off, laughter audible even through the closed windows and the length of Frederick's driveway.

What in the... He took a step back, eyes on the gift bag.

"Who was that?" Frederick appeared next to him, arms wrapped around his middle from the cold.

"Some kids."

"Kids?" Frederick frowned as if the word was foreign. Then he spotted the bag. "Huh."

"Probably some stupid pr—Don't just shove your hand in there!" Will snatched the bag from Frederick, who had already picked it up and eagerly rifled a hand inside. The bag came away while the contents—not dog shit or anything else obviously prank worthy—remained in Frederick's grasp.

He held a dark blue sweater, a bit worn looking, with something written across the front. Frederick fumbled, eyes narrow with drugged concentration, until he held it out flat to reveal letters cut from pieces of red felt. They appeared to be stitched on by hand.

DISREGARD

THE

Frederick blinked a few time, holding the sweater closer, then further from his face. "Um..."

Will pulled a bundle of tissue paper out of the bag, along with a card. The front showed a snowman lying on a couch next to a Freud-esque doctor, a speech bubble from his mouth read *'I find it hard to accept kindness, doctor. The warmth terrifies me!'* The inside contained only a handwritten message.

"'Doc, Keisha and I decided that the shirt wasn't really your style. Enjoy the sophisticated version. Felis navedad."

Frederick took the card out of his hand, scanned it for a moment, then pressed it and the sweater to his chest with a pat. "*Feliz Navidad.* Your accent is terrible." He turned and started a slow shuffle back to the kitchen.

Will closed the door, locking it for good measure. "Hold on a second. What was that?"

Frederick waved a hand at him. "It's not that bad, Will. Just pronounce the 'I's with a long ee. *Feleeez Naveeedad*. See?"

Will closed his eyes for strength. "I mean, why did two laughing teenagers just leave a gift on your doorstep?"

"Two?" They entered the kitchen, where Frederick increased his rate of shuffle to the French press. "Keisha must've been with her. That's good. Good. She needs friends. Doesn't have many."

"Ah. Your 'worst patient'." Will nodded, remembering the phone call from yesterday.

Frederick laid the sweater and card on the counter with a chuckle. "Uh-huh. My very *worst* patient. Can't think of a single one worse." He ran a finger down his torso, like a scalpel cutting.

Will cringed. He was definitely high.

"You didn't press out the grounds yet." Frederick whined as he eyed the press.

"They weren't done steeping." Will motioned him out of the way and began depressing the plunger.

"Mmm…gonna be too strong."

"Sounds like you need it."

Frederick gave him such a look, it was all Will could do to keep a straight face. He took down two cups and began pouring while Frederick retrieved a can opener and set to opening one of the cans of dog food on the counter.

"No eggs?"

“Too tired.” Frederick looked pleased with himself as he finished working the opener around the can and pried the top up. Will pressed his lips together, hard, since they were the sort of cans with pop tabs that didn’t require a can opener. “Mocha won’t care. He’s desperate.”

Frederick turned around several times, looking over the clear countertops as if a bowl would magically appear. Will pulled one down from the cupboard and slid it over to him.

Frederick upended the can and stared at it until the whole can-shaped blob dropped into the bowl with a splat. “Gross.”

Will cracked. He held the edge of the counter, almost spilling the press as laughter overtook him. It wasn't even that funny. Hell, it wasn't funny at all, it was just the...the *concentration* on Frederick's face. Aside from last night, which had struck him without warning too, he could not remember the last time he had laughed. Not really, not when it wasn't tainted with bitterness.

Recovering, he prepared to face Frederick's wounded dignity, only to find him smiling. His cheeks and ears had gone pink, and it suited him. The smile suited him too. It was nothing like the plastic grin of their first meeting, or the satisfied smirks he had come to recognize through the bars of his cell. It was genuine, warm.

Attractive.

Will grabbed the press and focused on filling both cups. When Frederick didn't move or say anything, he whistled for the dogs.

"I should have gotten two bowls," Will muttered, pulling down a second before digging a spoon out of the drawer. He divided the can-shaped blob between the bowls just as Maggie's clicking nails announced her arrival.

"She won't eat it," Frederick declared, shaking his head. "She's had better now."

Will put the bowl down and Maggie set to devouring it. Frederick let out a huff. "Disappointed in you, *Madam*."

Will pretended not to find that amusing, just like he was he pretending he hadn't thought what he just thought a moment ago. "Mocha?"

The dog hesitated at the corner to the hallway, keeping himself close to the wall. Will reached for the second bowl, but Frederick already had it. He went straight to Mocha, faster than Will would have, but the dog didn't flinch. He looked up at Frederick with bald adoration as he set the dish down in front of him. He wasted no time scarfing it down.

Frederick dropped to one knee and rubbed Mocha's back in long strokes, his expression growing soft and distant. Will could only watch, not really wanting to and yet feeling transfixed. Mocha licked the dish clean, then turned to bury his head against Frederick's side.

"I understand now. Why you do it."

"Do what?"

"The dogs. You had so many dogs." Frederick sighed the words, swaying a bit as his eyelids drooped. "So easy to fix. Help. Just...just food, attention. Can change their whole lives like...like nothing bad ever happened to them. You feel like...like a hero. Can't help my patients, not really." He rubbed both hands behind Mocha's ears, his drowsy smile turning sad. "It feels *good*."

Something in Will's stomach seemed to flip, and the back of his neck prickled with warmth. "Right. Maybe you should go back to the couch. You look like you're going to fall asleep."

"Mmm. Coffee."

"I've got it." He followed Frederick back to the living room with his cup, waiting for him to seat himself before handing it over. He cradled the cup in both hands and sipped, humming his approval.

On the TV, Ripley was busy tearing the company man a new one for his crimes. *'You're not gonna sleaze your way out of this one! Right to the wall!'*

Frederick took another sip of coffee, then set the half empty cup on a saucer on the ottoman, knocking over a cup that was already there. It was luckily empty.

"Going to sleep." He scooted back down along the sofa. "Wake me when I'm not sick."

"I don't think that's how it works."

"Okay."

Will smirked. "You're not going to stay awake for part three?"

"Ungh...third movie's awful."

Was Frederick going to remember any of this? Probably. "And the fourth movie?"

"Mmm...'sgot Michael Wincott...gorgeous."

That warm feeling returned, this time crawling around his neck and up to his scalp. "I don't think I know who that is, so I'll take your word for it."

Frederick was already asleep.

Liminal Space

Chapter Notes

> Finally, an update, after more than a month! I have no excuse, except to say I had to step back and get my bearings because the story from this point on gets very linear (one thing influencing the next, and making absolutely no sense if I mess up and skip something!). So, I had to do the old index card shuffle and get my ducks in a row. I finally have most of it down, so...
>
> ...here we are. 5,254 words =)
>
> PS: I can't remember if I mentioned this already, but the final word count for this fic is probably going to be pushing 140-150K.

The day after Christmas passed in a blur of sleep, television, and canned soup. The occasional gray outside could have been dusk or dawn, just as the bowls of chicken noodle Will pressed into his hands could have been breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Frederick was at least lucid enough to be sure he hadn't bought anything like condensed Campbell's. Will must have gone out.

He must have removed the chicken chunks too.

By the next day he was feeling better, which meant he was well enough to remember making a fool of himself. If his foggy memory served, he had not done or said anything too unforgivable, outside of admitting he liked the dogs. Damn it, he *had* said something to that effect, hadn't he?

Well, he still didn't like their hair on everything, so…there.

By the 28th, his remaining aches and pains had more to do with being prone for three days than the last remnants of the flu, though he had needed to check his phone to confirm the date. What was it about the week between Christmas and New Year's? It managed to both last forever and barely exist. Hopefully that unique phenomenon extended to the hospital and his patients, as he had received no frantic calls of emergency or complaining emails.

Still, he wasn't going to feel easy through another day if he did not at least check in. It was possible telling Alana that he never wanted to hear anything about Hannibal had been a mistake. Maybe she could leave a post-it note on his desk once a week, something curt and reassuring like '*Yes he's still in there.'*

Frederick smirked at the thought.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and headed for the kitchen, his cap-toed Oxfords clicking on the marble as he tapped out an email to Ellery on pushing up their weekly session to this afternoon, if she could. In truth, he wanted to surprise her with a box of pasticiotti from Vaccaro's and thank her for the hideous gift he would never wear. Or might wear. Only in the house.

He entered the kitchen to find Will bent over his ancient laptop, frowning as he tried to work the old pea-sized mouse nestled between the keys. That stupid thing had been the bane of Frederick's college all-nighters.

"You're better off just tabbing over or using keyboard shortcuts."

Will glared at the low resolution screen like he wanted to arrest it. "I never had to learn keyboard shortcuts, because there was always a *mouse*. People actually lived with this … dot?"

"Yes, when dinosaurs roamed the earth." Really, he wasn't *that* much older than Will. "It was never terribly popular. Something they tried for a while with laptops."

Will grunted a non-reply and leaned so close to the screen the text reflected on his glasses. Mocha lay curled up on a mound of fabric next to the Will's chair, which, upon closer inspection, was actually Will's coat.

"In case you aren't entirely enamored with the scent of dog on you everywhere you go, there are a few spare blankets in the hall closet."

Will continued staring at the screen for longer than any hearing person should before he looked up. "What?"

Frederick didn't know whether to laugh or scowl, which was odd. He distinctly remembered being the sort of person who found nothing funny about being covered in dog filth.

"I said there are blankets in the hall closet for—"

"Where are you going?" Will looked him up and down, then leaned across the table to look in the direction of the living room where, presumably, Frederick should still be vegetating.

"I am *going* to the hospital. I have a distant fevered memory of actually being employed there."

Will frowned. "You're still sick."

Frederick bit off his reply and took the opportunity of slipping his tablet into his briefcase to look away, hoping the sudden strange heat on his cheeks was not visible. Then he remembered the two days of coffee, and chicken soup, and Will turning off the TV to usher him to his bed. Like he actually gave a damn.

If any more blood went to his face, he was going to pass out. "I feel much better."

Will opened his mouth as if to object, but snapped it closed a second later, his frown only deepening. “Right.”

“I’ll, eh…” Frederick fussed with the ends of his scarf like a fool. Of course he would be back later. It was his house. “Bye.”

Will nodded, his eyes back on the screen, and Frederick headed for the garage door.

“We’re almost out of coffee! And bread.”

Frederick huffed, but he was going to stop at Vaccaro’s anyway. “I’ll get some!”

Frederick closed the garage door behind him and practically ran to the car. Good God, this winter was frigid! He had the garage door humming up and the heat blasting before he realized what had just happened.

We’re almost out of coffee.

We are.

We.

He almost backed out before the door had a chance to clear.

****

One of the lingering effects from his days running the hospital like a snappish autocrat was that no one questioned his comings and goings, at least not in any capacity he heard. He was the boss, after all. Not to mention his predecessor had been the worst sort of useless figurehead, spending more days at his health club than in his office. If Frederick only showed up half as often as he did, he would still be a workaholic by comparison.

He rushed in, huddled against the cold, and moved across the echoing marble lobby to the stairs. How could he have forgotten the place was such a *cave*?

“Morning, Doctor. Feeling better?”

Frederick acknowledged the two orderlies coming down the stairs, a little more pleased than he should be at the cordial greeting. “Yes, much—How did you know I was sick?”

One of them—Ronnie?—let out a nervous laugh. “Eh…we figured when you didn’t show up to work the day after Christmas, you had to be sick or dead.”

Really, he wasn’t that much of a workaholic. After all, his last vacation—the real sort, not forced by medical trauma— had been only…*Oh.* Before he was director.

“I’m sure you would have heard of the latter, so yes, I was a bit under the weather.” And the subzero temperatures weren't helping. He had coughed half his way through the parking lot. He gave a swift nod of goodbye and continued for the steps, but the other orderly—Frederick was at a loss for his name—made a *psst!* sound at him.

“Heads up, boss. Dr. Bloom was on the war path for you earlier.”

Frederick was mid eye roll when the sound of swift heels reached him through the marble hall. Too swift.

“Thank you, gentlemen.” It was all the dismissal they needed to hurry off, passing Alana as she came down the main front hall.

“Dr. Bloom.”

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing with Hannibal, but you need to stop.”

The name alone was enough to make his stomach knot. “Excuse me?”

“If it were up to me, he would have nothing but his own thoughts for company, but I have lawyers sending me weekly memos *reminding* me of Hannibal’s right to correspondence. His right to reading materials, his *rights* against censorship. I can’t keep this from him!” She shook the paper clenched in her fist, the sort of supermarket tabloid dripping in colored inks and screaming headlines.

Frederick knew the law pertaining to the rights of hospital inmates better than anyone, and she damn well could keep almost anything from Hannibal. Or, she could if he wasn’t holding something over her.

He forced his shoulders square. “And this has *what* to do with me?”

Her eyes went round in a truly frightening way, so much so he had a flashing vision of being gutted again, right there on the steps. She tossed the paper at him, the pages flapping open as they struck his chest. “If this is your way of exacting some petty revenge on him, stop. First of all, it won’t work, at least not the way you think it will. And second, you aren’t the one who has to deal with the fallout.”

“What the hell are you talking abou—” Righting the paper as he spoke, his words caught in his throat at the sight of…himself. There, on the right side of the center fold of Freddie Lounds’ finger-staining rag, was a creased picture of him and Will, standing next to his car. The headline across the fold read:

JOINED IN ACQUITTAL!

Special Investigator Graham Says ‘So Long!’ to Murder Husbands!

'Hello!' to Profiler Pals!

Frederick swallowed around the rising sting of bile at the back of his throat. He scanned down to the rest of the story, but couldn't focus on the letters. His attention lay fixed on the picture, the way Will had his face tilted back in joyous laughter, the perspective and fuzzy edges that indicated someone had taken the photo at a distance with a less than ideal zoom, and…and the look on his own face.

Oh, God... His head swam as he ran through his memories of that night. The only thing on his mind had been getting home, wrapping himself in ten blankets and falling asleep. Or, it had been until Will had started smiling, and laughing, and looking so damn beautiful it had hit Frederick like a fist. All his shameful memories of Will's time in the hospital, and before, had rushed back to him in that moment, just as they were now. All those weeks of leering at him, taunting him, enjoying the fact he was caged like a pretty bird Frederick could marvel over whenever he wished.

But, more startling, he had remembered that he actually *was* attracted to the Will. Such a thing had been easy to forget when he was cuffed to a hospital bed in excruciating pain, with nothing to keep him company beyond hatred for the ones who had put him there. Will hadn't seemed quite so attractive after that.

The same man who had fixed his stupid water heater, and brought him bowls of soup…

"Nothing to say for yourself?"

Yes, right. Alana was there. "Am I meant to respond to Freddie Lounds' tripe now?"

She snatched back the paper, waving it again. "Don't act like you didn't have a part in this. Lord knows I understand the urge to get back at Hannibal, but this…this sophomore attempt at jealousy is sad, Frederick. You can't possibly believe you could make him jealous."

Her overemphasis on 'you' was a perfect fine ice-pick, bypassing the vital organs and going straight for his ego. Of course he could never make Hannibal jealous, especially not with anything involving Will. Jealousy required at least some sense of threat, and if there was one thing Frederick had never been to Hannibal it was threatening.

He slid on his best mask of boredom. "I was asked to interview a witness, presumably because it was Christmas Eve and people like you had better things to do. Ms. Lounds really is hard to miss in a crowd, so I assume someone else decided to take a picture of Graham laughing at me and sell it to her for a tidy sum. It's not my fault if she wants to concoct fairytales for her imbecile readers."

Alana's blazing eyes faltered, shifting down to the paper. "Laughing *at* you?"

Oh, yes, should would believe that, wouldn't she? Who wouldn't? Dr. Frederick Chilton, Baltimore's illustrious town fool. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember what Will had been laughing about. Something to do with the dog?

"If you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

“You know how Freddie is. She will keep on the story if she has anything to use for it, so…” Alana proceeded to fold the paper back into some semblance of order. “So maybe you should just stay away from Will and the FBI.”

It was Alana speaking, but Frederick swore he felt the chill of a Lithuanian accent crawl down his spine. “I beg your pardon?”

“It isn’t as if you have the best history,” She continued, not looking at him. “I don’t see why you would want to put yourself out there for the FBI, of all things. Considering.”

A burning pressure seemed to be working its way up his chest, causing his pulse to quicken. Considering? How quickly she forgot her role in all the things he should be *considering.* It wasn’t Jack Crawford who had sat across from him in an interrogation room and called him a liar and a killer, although he no doubt would have if he had gotten the chance. And Frederick’s lawyer had been dogged in getting the statements from everyone, the affidavits from agents Price and Zeller confirming that it had been Dr. Bloom who pointed the finger at Frederick over the presence of certain drugs they had found in Will and Miriam Lass, drugs that were easily accessible to any doctor and used for a variety of reasons.

“Thank you so much for the advice, Dr. Bloom. I’ll *consider* having my actions dictated by the likes of Freddie Lounds, or you, when I’ve thoroughly lost my mind. Until then, I’ll rely on my own council.” He turned back to the stairs, only to have his sleeve caught as he grabbed the banister.

“God damn it, you’re not the one who has to deal with him!” She hissed, the words couched in a harsh whisper. Frederick snapped around, startled with the instinct to free himself, but the look in Alana’s eyes stopped him short. Anger, frustration…and a kind of shaky desperation he had never seen there before. For all her broad shouldered suits and fierce demeanor, she looked like spun glass ready to break.

Frederick looked away. “He’s in a cage. He can’t do anyth—”

“Don’t patronize me.” She dropped his sleeve. “You can say it’s just words, he’s powerless in there, but you don’t know. You’re not the one serving him wine and listening to his *poison*. You have no idea, *no idea.”*

“I know.”

She’s sneered at him, her fist once again crunching the paper. Her shoulders slumped for a moment, like some invisible weight she carried had just gotten another stone. He would not pity her, he wouldn’t! What pity did she deserve from him, after everything?

God damn you Hannibal.

“I know,” he said again, voice lowered. “I know exactly what he is, and what he does without raising a finger. Why do you think I let you have him?” *Because I’m not strong enough. Because he would have shattered me weeks ago.* “I was prepared to be the one dealing with him. I was ready to take one—huh—take *another* for the team, but you wanted to be his keeper. And you know as well as I he needs no outside influence to be his lovely

manipulative self. If it isn't some fiction in Tattle Crime, it will be something else." He pressed his lips together, hesitating over his next words. "And with whatever he has over you always in the background, we should be glad we have Ms. Lounds to distract him."

The hardness in her eyes, which had faltered seconds before, slammed back into place. "I'll be sure to remember that. By the way, he asked to see you."

"Good for him."

She gave a wry smile, as if expecting the response. "You should be glad he asks, Frederick. It gives you the rare pleasure of telling him no."

With the last word, she turned on her heel and headed off. He waited until the click of her heels faded before he quickened his pace, practically running up the remaining steps and punching in his code to enter the administrative wing. The halls were thankfully empty as he made his way to the office suite, even his assistant was absent from her desk. He flew into his office, tossing his briefcase into a chair as he went for the laptop on his desk. The startup was painfully slow.

"Come on." He struggled out of his coat and scarf, tossing them aside as well, only to groan as he snatched them up and hung them properly on the stand near the door. He was not an animal, and he certainly wasn't a nervous wreck who was going to get all flustered for nothing. Because that's what this was…nothing. Just another one of Freddie's little tabloid circuses. Will would understand that. After all, who had suffered more at her story-mongering hands than him? He wouldn't believe the silly implications of that headline, and he certainly wouldn't take a photograph out of context.

He won't leave.

Frederick hovered over the computer, ignoring his chair, as Tattlecrime.com loaded around the many advertisements and cluttered gifs. There was nothing about the story on the front page. He went to the site search bar and typed in his name. The resulting list showed the most recent mention of him to be the unflattering *Where Are They Now* snippet she had done several months ago, complete with a picture of him on the hospital steps wearing a wrinkled sweater and unstyled hair.

Freddie hadn't put the story online. Yet. Or maybe she was trying to lure her readers to the print edition to make more money.

Maybe Will wouldn't see it at all.

Frederick collapsed in his chair, his chest tight. Of course Will would see it. Maybe not today but soon, because the universe had decided long ago that Frederick's luck just didn't work that way. The only time his problems went away was if or when he paid for them. A kidney here, an eye there; the price of ending a problem.

Frederick sneered, slapping down the computer screen as he rose to retrieve his briefcase. Pessimistic he may be, but he wasn't going to slip into philosophical fatalism. The day he did that was the day he belonged on the other side of the security door. A faint voice, more like a

feeling, in the back of his mind insisted that it would be fine if Will saw the story and grew irritated. In fact, it would be great if he decided to distance himself from Frederick and even the barest appearance of being friendly with him by packing up his wrinkly clothes and smelly dog and getting out of his damn house. Frederick wasn't running a hotel, after all.

But the voice was small, empty, like a bored child reciting lines in a school play. At some point, a person simply had to be honest enough to overcome their own defense mechanisms, and the truth was that Will leaving his house was the last thing Frederick wanted. It hadn't even been a full week, and yet the thought of going back to an empty house and evenings alone with his spiraling thoughts sent his pulse rising. He would have Mocha now, but the dog would be alone all day, and what kind of company was Frederick alone? Ha! He couldn't do that to the poor thing!

A rising sense of unease prickled his skin. He wanted to lock his office door, check the bathroom and wardrobe, close the ceiling height curtains against anyone who might be looking in, but he resisted the unreasonable panic. His hands shook as he transferred his tablet and other things from his briefcase to the desk, reminding him of something else he meant to do, something he had been putting off for far too long.

Seated again, he grabbed the landline and only hesitated a moment before dialing the extension for Dr. Bhaduri. She was a dedicated therapist, serious, and—most important— had never seemed to have any feelings about him one way or another. She picked up on the second ring.

"Bhaduri."

"Good morning, it's Dr. Chilton. I was wondering if you have a free moment on your schedule this afternoon. I'm looking for a referral."

"Of course, yes. Which patient?"

"It's, eh…" He gripped the phone until the plastic creaked. "It's for me."

****

"They found drugs on him when he was arrested. I couldn't have planned that, Doc. That was just good luck."

For the fifth—no tenth—time in the last twenty minutes Frederick cupped a hand over his eyes and willed away the roiling in his stomach. She could have been hurt. *Badly* hurt. She still could, and the thought was making him queasy.

"Be that as it may, people arrested for drug possession can *still* get bail. He could—very likely, in fact—get out and be very upset with you." This man who obviously knew where she lived, knew where she went to school.

Ellery did a fairly good impression of shrugging off the concern as she took another bite from her raspberry-almond pasticiotti, but she was no practiced actor. If Frederick had to guess, he would say she had already come to the same conclusion not long after the incident in the cemetery.

“I know.” She sighed around the pastry. “But now the cops might take me seriously if I have to call them. And if he gets arrested again while he’s out on bail, it will be revoked and he won't get any money back.”

Frederick tapped his pen against the edge of his folio. “I see you’ve been asking the pre-law students for free legal advice.”

“You don’t have to ask, they never shut up.”

He huffed a laugh, a little irritated that she could so easily make him do so. This was no laughing matter. Still, it was done, and no amount of lecturing was going to change anything now. And, though he hated to admit it, he couldn’t see what else she could have done. The law wouldn't do anything about this bastard until he did something first.

Such a lovely system...

“How was your Christmas?” She asked, smirk firmly set in place.

“A rather ham-fisted change of subject. Aren’t I supposed to ask you that?”

“I beat you to it.”

Frederick narrowed his eyes in faux disapproval. “*My* Christmas was rather surprising. A patient, who isn’t supposed to know where I live but somehow does, decided to play ding-dong-ditch and leave a gift on my doorstep.”

“Really?” She scooped up some pastry filling before it could drop. “Sounds dangerous. I hear all your patients are lunatics.”

“Just one, apparently.”

The words caught her mid bite, causing her to sputter crumbs across her lap as she laughed.

“And thank you for the lovely gift. I’ll be sure to wear it to the next FBI Christmas party.”

“Take pictures.” She dusted the crumbs from her hands and leaned back. "You didn't bring your dog this time."

"Ah. Well, Maggie isn't actually mine. She belongs to a...a friend of mine." The word left a strange taste in his mouth. He doubted Will considered him a friend. He doubted if *he* considered Will a friend.

"You mean that guy who answered the door?"

"Yes, and please don't pepper me with silly personal questions again like you did on the phone—"

"So he's the same guy who answered your phone." Her dark eyes widened playfully. "I didn't really see him because I was running away, but he had a nice voice over the phone. Bravo, Doc."

"*Ay, Dios!* Stop." He tossed his head back with a groan. "We are not doing 'invade your doctor's personal life' this session. Or any session. We're here to talk about you."

"And the psychological trauma I might suffer if you don't tell me about your boyfriend?"

“No!”

“Oh, you probably don’t like that word. Too immature. Partner?”

“He is not my partner, boyfriend, or anything. He's just someone who—" Freddie Lounds’ damn article flashed in his head again. His cheeks and ears, and the damn tip of his nose went red. He couldn't see it, but he didn't have to. He could *feel* the warmth of blood rushing to his face. He closed his eyes. "You realize I don't have to put up with this sort of thing from my murderous patients."

She let out a good laugh at that. It even included a pitying *aww* sound. "Alright. I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I am not embarrassed."

"You weren't that color when you came in here."

God damn it. "There's another dog, though. His name is Mocha."

She tilted her head. "'A rather ham-fisted change of subject,’ but fine. Will you bring him next time?"

"Yes. I mean, maybe. He's a rescue dog." Who he should have taken to an adoption shelter today, but hadn't. Wouldn't. Probably. Frederick rubbed a circle against his temple, trying to remember a time when hadn't been this scattered.

"I guess that's good enough. You brought pastries today, so I'll let it go this time," She said magnanimously, even closing her eyes for the full regal effect.

"Why, thank you for the pass. I thought you might like something not swimming in high fructose corn syrup and imitation chocolate."

"We can't all buy snacks at *Boutique du Food*, or wherever you shop, Mr. Rockefeller."

Laughter caught him, shaking his chest and rattling something loose. A second later he was coughing into his sleeve like a lung would come up. “That’s—ugh. That’s *doctor* Rockefeller, thank you. Now, eh, going back to the subject of *you*, how has your break been? I know you don’t prefer spending a lot of time at home.”

“At the Morgans’.”

“At the Morgans’,” he corrected. She refused to see her foster placement as her home.

“Classes are out, but the library and a few others things are open. I would rather be here than there. Are you sick?”

He shook his head, which wasn’t much of a denial as he sputtered out a few more coughs. “I’m just getting over a cold, that’s all.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re over it.” She leaned forward, giving him an unabashed examination. “You should have stayed home longer, to get better. The hospital could go a few days without you. Besides, no one does anything between Christmas and New Year’s. ”

“Liminal space,” he muttered, shaking his head at the notion she could have read his thoughts from that morning. She smiled, needing no explanation of the term. “I really am doing much better. Besides, how do you know I even went to work? Perhaps I hauled myself from the sick bed just to hear how your Christmas went.”

“Nice try, Doc, but you were definitely at work. You smell like the hospital.”

Frederick’s jaw dropped. “I *smell* like the hospital? Well, thank you very much.”

She rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t meant as an insult.”

“Because hospitals are such lovely smelling places.”

“Don’t worry. It’s very faint and it’s not a *hospital* smell. It’s an artificial floral scent, like sunflowers, but not sharp like a floor cleaner or a disinfectant. It’s always there, a little bit, when you come from the hospital.”

Frederick scoffed, ready to tease her about intentionally diverting attention from her Christmas, when he stopped. Artificial sunflowers…small yellow packets of potpourri…the packets one of the HR secretaries hung next to all the heating vents in the administrative wing because she couldn’t stand the smell of the hospital disinfectants…the packets she replaced regularly.

“That is one impressive sense of smell.”

She shrugged as she reached for another pasticiotti. “My mom thought it was weird too.”

They did eventually get around to discussing her Christmas, and some of the reasons why she attempted to avoid the subject. As Frederick had suspected, the holiday had been one of her mother’s favorites, and her current situation with the Morgans no doubt paled in comparison.

As the session drew to a close, and Frederick began to feel a conflicting guilt at not having bought her a Christmas present, Ellery wavered next to the sofa.

“I have an appointment to take the driver’s test next month, after my birthday.”

He smiled. “I see. One step closer to that full-fledged adulthood you’re after?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. It was a good sign that some of the heavy subjects from their earlier sessions had become fodder for jokes. “One more swing on the obstacle course. I’ve already taken the written test and everything else, I just have the driving test left.”

Frederick tucked his folio back into his briefcase. “I’m sure you’ll do well.” When there was no immediate reply, something along the lines of how she *always* did well, he looked up. Ellery was fussing with the clasp on her bag and not looking at him. She rarely avoided eye contact, and she never *fussed*. “Ellery?”

“I don’t have a car for the test. It’s at noon on a Tuesday, and Mrs. Morgan has to take her brother to physical therapy on Tuesdays, and Mr. Morgan has one of those stupid lifted diesel trucks, and I wouldn’t take the test in that even if he would let me, which I know he wouldn’t. Keisha’s friend Logan has a car, but it’s really his Dad’s, and the real owner of the car has to be present before the test starts….”

Ellery also never rambled.

Oh.

He shouldn’t. Really, he *couldn’t.* He had already smeared the doctor-patient line beyond recognition when he went to New York, *and* when he didn’t chastise her for leaving a gift at his house. This was too much, though. Doing favors for patients outside of their session time, especially things unrelated to their therapy…it was a definite breach.

“Mrs. Morgan said I’m better off without a license anyway. ‘The last thing we need is you getting more out of hand than you already are…’”

What!? “I suppose you could use my car for your test.” *Don’t.* “I’m sure the examiner will be so impressed he’ll miss half of your mistakes.” *Nooo.*

Ellery dropped the clasps on her bag and grinned. “Your car isn’t that nice, Doc.”

“I beg to differ." *I plead insanity.*

"This is great," she gushed, an uncharacteristic bounce in her step as she slung her bag over her shoulder. "The phi alpha theta regional conference is next month at William & Mary, and Dr. Drees can't drive with his vision problems. Me and some of the others can take turns."

Frederick couldn't help but smile, his thoughts tossed back to his pre-med days. "I was in phi alpha theta, you know. I even presented two papers."

"History papers? Were they on the history of psychology?"

"Of course. I even did one on the socio-economic roots of phrenology, which the audience found suitably amusing." He pulled on his coat and headed for the door, holding it open for her to go ahead. "Although, I must say I'm surprised they let you in, being a *chemistry* major. You scientists, heads full of nothing but numbers."

She reached the edge of the stairs and headed down, as usual taking them far faster than he was yet comfortable with since he gave up his cane. At the landing below she turned back with a smirk. "'Better dead than pre-med.' See you next week."

Frederick smiled halfway to his car. If he ever received another ugly sweater, he had a feeling he knew what would be written on it.

New Year's Eve

Chapter Notes

6/14/19
How long has it been since the last update? Shamefully long, BUT I beg forgiveness with this shamelessly indulgent chapter which I considered not writing at all (it's hard to get away from that mass market mentality of "every scene should push the plot!")

So, without further ado, here is the longest chapter thus far, at 15,227 words

[Notes: The National Aquarium in Baltimore is so impressive that one could easily waste paragraphs trying to describe it. So, instead, here is a pic set to give you an idea of the place:

Frederick was acting odd. For the past two days he had been unusually tense and alert, as if waiting for something awful to happen. Every now and then he would poke his head into the kitchen to ask Will if he had "been out or anything", then look relieved when he said no. Jack called a few times, demanding to know his progress and why it wasn't better, and after each call ended Frederick had come into the kitchen pretending to need something as he casually —or so he thought—asked who had called. At first, Will chalked it up to the general anxiety Frederick now lived with, and did a poor job of hiding. But it soon became clear that whatever awful thing Frederick was waiting for, Will was meant to be the source of it.

And now he knew why.

Profiler Pals.

Freddie was getting lazy. Murder Husbands had been cheesy enough, but this latest moniker sounded like something off a day-time kids' show. Something with a scruffy FBI dog and a green-eyed cat working together to find clues. Will scanned through the article, rolling his eyes at her many references to buried hatchets and water under bridges. She painted a tale of former adversaries finding solace—she actually used that word—with each other, while the "much maligned" Dr. Frederick Chilton sought redemption for his past failures by assisting the FBI with their hunt for the Horseman.

For two days Frederick had been walking on eggshells in his own home, waiting for a blade to drop, because of *this*. Because he thought Will was going to react badly to one of Freddie's tabloid concoctions.

Because he thinks I'll get angry and leave. Frederick wanted him there, that much had become clear. Probably not Will specifically, but he didn't want to be alone.

"You're a real pain in the ass, Freddie." He scanned through the so-called article, sneering where appropriate and laughing where it probably wasn't.

He found himself feeling oddly insulted on Frederick's behalf. There was nothing about the help he had given them with the Swenson girl, nothing about his early work in pediatric psychology or the fact he had come out sick, on Christmas Eve, to a crime scene when he should be the last person on Earth willing to do so. None of that was public information, but considering Freddie's dogged methods she could have easily found it all. Or, she had found it, and simply chose not to include it. Someone in Jack's camp must be feeding her gossip. And pictures.

That picture.

Will ran a hand over his face, exhaustion and cold prickling his skin despite still being bundled up from his trip to the drug store. He wouldn't have even seen the article if he hadn't gone out for amoxicillin and ear wash for Mocha. He had been standing in line, zoning out with thoughts of Lucas Reed's last psyche evaluation, when Frederick's name grabbed him from the tabloid rack next to the register. He had snatched it up and...there he was. There *they* were, spread across the center fold with him on one side laughing like an idiot, and Frederick on the other looking at him like...

Like someone had managed to take a picture at just the right moment to be suggestive. That was it.

Nothing more.

Even in his homicide days he had learned to distrust photographs. While his fellow officers had over-analyzed images of a victim's family "smiling" and "looking carefree" at the funeral, Will had seen nothing but split second takes in time, shifts of facial muscles that came with no context or truth, despite being factual. As far as evidence of emotion or mental state in the living, photographs were worse than useless.

So a photograph of Frederick looking at him in a way that could only be described with words like 'dazzled' and 'smitten' were sure as hell inadmissible*, let it please the court.*

That wasn't to say he hadn't known from the very first meeting that Frederick found him attractive. Even if he hadn't seen it right off it would have been impossible to miss later, through the bars of his cell, when Frederick's eyes would linger on him a bit too long. The way his cheeks would redden when Will returned the stare with all the silent hostility he could muster.

Will folded the paper, which he had bought for who-knows-what-reason, and stuffed it inside one of the document boxes. He should play dumb, pretend he never saw it, if not for any better reason than for the sake of Frederick's blood pressure.

But it was Frederick's reaction he found so curious.

The old Frederick, the one he had been so sure he knew, would have brought up the article immediately. He would have waved it around, disgusting—or feigning to be so—as he

declared how ridiculous it was that he would be '*Profiler Pals'* with the likes of Will Graham. *"Solace?! Good God! I think I would have better taste than a man who was probably born in a flannel shirt covered in dog hair!"*

But there had been no insults, no outrage, feigned or otherwise. Frederick was not acting like someone who had been misrepresented. He was acting like someone who had been caught.

Unaccountable warmth crawled up Will's neck, chasing away the prickle of the afternoon cold.

Maggie and Mocha, who were still standing around him in expectation of a greeting, snapped their heads around at the sound of the garage door. They ran off just as Will slapped a lid on the document box, like a criminal.

Frederick came into the kitchen a minute later, his hands equally occupied with dog heads and a stack of mail.

"Yes, I see you," he griped, though the soft smile on his face made it pointless. He seemed to marvel in particular at the way Mocha calmed and closed his eyes at Frederick's touch. That is, until Frederick leaned a little closer and his nose scrunched up. "Ugh. Are you supposed to smell like that?"

"It's his ears. He has a yeast infection."

Frederick snapped his hand back. "Lovely."

"I bought some ear wash, it should be cleared up a few days. Do you have cotton balls?"

Frederick pulled of his coat, holding the expensive wool far from Mocha's head. "Yes, I have some upst—Oh. You went out." He stared at the drugstore bag sitting on the counter.

Will pressed his lips together, tamping down on the sudden, and rather uncharacteristic, urge to tease him. It would be so easy, but the look on Frederick's face stopped him. He looked like he was going to be sick.

"Yeah, but I forgot to buy the cotton balls."

Frederick's shoulders must have dropped half a foot with relief as he set his attention back to the stack of mail, to an oddly shaped card in particular. He turned it over in both hands, opened it, closed it, tapped it against the counter top as he bit his lower lip and looked off to the pool deck and the field beyond.

"Problem?"

Frederick flatted the card on the stack. "No, eh…" He huffed as Maggie leapt up to put her paws on his hip. "I think I'll change before one of your wards puts another line item on my dry cleaning bill."

Frederick lowered Maggie in his usual soft manner before heading off upstairs, *his* wards fast on his heels.

Will had never considered himself a snoop, despite being a detective. He so rarely had enough interest in individual people to be one, which was why he was a little surprised with himself when he went directly to the stack of mail and picked up the card Frederick had been frowning over.

It was shaped like a flounder fish, a few inches of the top fin serving as the seam for the card to open. As he turned it, the scales glistened and shifted to reveal words:

The Baltimore Medical Association

~Presents~

Our 32nd Annual New Year's Eve Bash.

Will stepped back to get a cautious look down the front hall before he flipped the card open.

Swim into the New Year through

Baltimore's National Aquarium!

Enjoy dinner and cocktails

under the glow of the coral tanks.

Guests may arrive at the main entrance any time after 8pm.
Dinner to be served at 9pm, à **la famille.**

Dress Code: Black Tie preferred. Formal acceptable

Guest: *Dr. Frederick Chilton, plus one.*

Will closed the card and laid back on the pile. The edges were dented and worn, as if someone had been handling it a great deal. He could see Frederick, slumped in his desk chair at the hospital, turning the invitation in his fingers as he agonized over attending.

He would have good reason to agonize. For Will, the decision to attend a party had always been easy: a resounding no, thank you. He had never attended the various holiday parties at the Academy, even managing to conveniently disappear before the sporadic office birthday

gatherings could rope him in. He had even succeeded in avoiding the few large dinner parties Hannibal had thrown, and what a pathetically small victory that was now.

While Frederick was not nearly the social butterfly Will had once taken him for, he wasn't a recluse either. He was isolated. He was lonely. It radiated off him like a scent. Still, after everything that had happened, everything Frederick had done and been accused of doing, his wavering of a professional gathering was understandable.

Not all the sharks would be in tanks, and Frederick's professional blood was still fresh in the water.

The sound of footsteps and toenails had him snatching up a glass of water and retreating to the mountain of medical files. It was none of his business what Frederick did or didn't do with his evening, and—and it *was* the 31st, wasn't it? Will glanced at his watch. It was just past four.

It's four-oh-five. I'm in my ex-jailer's house. My name is Will Graham.

He snorted over his water glass.

"Something funny?"

Will's response, if he had one, died when he looked up to see a man who couldn't possibly be Dr. Frederick Chilton. The man currently giving him the hard side-eye from the kitchen stood on bare feet poking out of dark wash jeans. His tie and dress shirt were gone, replaced with a baby blue V-neck sweater that stretched across his chest and shoulders like it had been meant for a smaller man. He picked up the stack of mail, and Will's eyes fixed on the tensed vein that traveled over the back of his hand to disappear into the muscles of his exposed forearm, where he had pushed up his sleeves.

Frederick waved a hand at Will's continued lack of response. "What?"

"You aren't wearing any shoes." The stupid words sounded through the kitchen as if someone else had spoken them.

Frederick let out a huff as he dropped the mail and went to the refrigerator. "Yes, I might take off my shoes in *my own house*. It's usually the place where people do that."

"Right."

"Are you feeling okay?"

No. "You're not my doctor anymore, Frederick."

"And you're not a nurse, but *thank you* for the chicken soup anyway." Frederick turned away from the fridge mid eye roll to place a few items on the counter. After retrieving several more things from the pantry, it looked like he was preparing to make something involved.

"Not going out, then?"

Frederick snapped his head up, only to turn his eyes swiftly back to the counter. “No. It’s a Tuesday.”

“It’s New Year’s Eve.” *I’m in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is Fool Who Should Leave It Alone.*

That fact that Frederick did not immediately snap at him to mind his own business was telling. Instead, he worked his fingers slowly over an onion, brushing off the dried outer skin.

“I have invitations, of course…”

Of course.

“But I’m not really in the mood for all that noise...”

Because aquariums are known for being loud.

“And I don’t really want to go through the trouble of dressing…”

You buy suits worth more than my car.

“And they don’t want me there anyway.”

Oh.

“Oh.”

Frederick’s fumbled with the onion, his eyes down as he brushed the skins into his hand and took them to the trash can. His ears had gone warm pink, no doubt from the unintentional honesty.

Drop it. “Seems counter-productive to send invitations to people you don’t want at your party.”

Frederick scoffed, the sound ugly and bitter as he began dicing the onion.

“They have to invite me. I’m the director of the only criminally insane treatment facility on the East coast. They wouldn’t risk losing access to their most prized specimens by openly snubbing me.” Frederick’s motions with the knife grew shaky, like his heart was pounding. “I haven’t been to any—haven’t been out much this year, and they know that. They’re betting on me not attending, and they’ll be disappointed if I do.”

Will stood silent, surprised Frederick would reveal something so embarrassing. He had always known Frederick to be a man seeking to increase his self-image, not shrink it with honesty.

Will remembered the weeks after the shooting, almost two months of the Baltimore psychiatric community patting itself on the back with hindsight assertions that they had always *suspected* there was something *not quite right* about that Dr. Chilton. There had been a few editorials, a smattering of quotes that reporters had been sure to pepper through their

ongoing coverage. But the worst had probably been behind the scenes, less refined and measured than anything the laymen public might consume. No one had voiced public doubt, no one had come to Frederick's defense. And after, when the pendulum dropped and Hannibal was gone, there had been no retractions and, Will could guess, no apologies.

A sudden rush of anger ticked up his pulse and twisted his stomach, the sort only a self-righteous hypocrite could feel. *I'm sorry, Frederick.*

"So disappoint them."

Frederick stopped, his cupped hands holding a mound of diced onion over a bowl. "What?"

"Go. Disappoint them." Will stepped forward, breathing deep to keep the second-hand anger off his face. Or maybe not so second hand. How angry was he the day Jack came to fetch him from his cage with no apologies? Jack, who could see no reason to blame himself for being tricked, and therefore saw no reason to make amends?

Will placed his hands on the counter across from Frederick. "Rub it in their faces."

Frederick gawked as if Will had gone mad. Actually, that was wrong. Frederick had an entirely different look when he thought he was seeing a madman, and this wasn't it.

"Rub it in their faces?"

"Yes."

"And by 'it', you mean…"

"You." Will liked the way Frederick's eyes darted over the counter surface, such a perfect visual match to the way his mind was now searching over the possibilities. Again, Will considered he had never met someone whose inner workings showed so plainly on the surface.

It was simply ridiculous that Frederick had ever tried to make his career on a lie.

Frederick finally dropped the onions in the bowl. "No. Everyone would be uncomfortable."

"They've earned some discomfort."

"Have you?" Frederick quipped, then his eyes rounded as he snapped his mouth shut.

Will worked his tongue over the sharp points of his teeth. He could point out how he had already tried to apologize before Frederick had shut him down, but it hadn't been the right time. He knew that. He also knew that time was still coming and he probably wasn't going to like it when it did.

Will shrugged. "I have. And I promise, I've been extremely uncomfortable here several times. Well earned."

Frederick narrowed his eyes, but his lips also twitched against a smile. “Did you just make a joke?”

“Not a very good one.”

Frederick grabbed a towel to wipe his hands. “Well, funny as it may be, I…I don’t think I can do that.”

“Make people uncomfortable? I think you can pull that off.”

“Will Graham, ever the wit. Just so I understand you clearly, you are suggesting I attend one of the most biggest events of the year, where the highest members of the Baltimore medical community will be, with the *intent* of ‘making it awkward?’”

“No, I’m suggesting you go to a party—at the aquarium, of all places— enjoy yourself, and let them create all the awkwardness for themselves.” Will doubted Frederick enjoying himself was going to be in the cards, but that wasn’t the point. The point was to make them, make *someone*, face their damn mistakes. Even if the only price they paid was one night of discomfort while they waited for Frederick for sling recriminations.

Frederick traded the towel for a jar of olives, staring at the label. “Is this what you would do?”

“No, but I don’t care what people think.”

“Everyone cares to some degree what others think,” Frederick drawled, rolling his eyes. “Unless they’re genuinely psychotic.”

Touché.

“So I care a little, but what I do is insular. I deal with Jack, a handful of CSU techs, that's it. If you plan to work with these people for the rest of your life, you have to put yourself in front of them and make them accept that ‘out of sight, out of mind’ is not an option. You'll stand in front of people who called you a serial killer and they will either apologize or pretend they never believed you were guilty. But you'll know, and they'll know, and *that's* the point. To make them know that you know. Don't let them escape that."

Frederick stared at him for several seconds before he shook his head, as if wiping away a thought. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

"This conversation or any conversation?”

"Point taken."

"It would be good for you." It was only Will's lifetime of training in keeping a blank face that stopped him cringing at the words. He hadn't meant to say that. In fact, he hadn't meant to say almost anything that had spilled from his mouth in the past five minutes. But there it all was. He *did* think a little confrontation—couched in the passive-aggressive games the Baltimore elite seemed to like so much—would be good for Frederick. He *did* think a lot of them deserved a little uncomfortable retribution for all their opportunistic character assassinations.

And, surprising as it was the realize, he *did* think Frederick deserved the chance going forward to rise or fall on his work alone, not to sink because Hannibal wrapped a weight around his neck.

Frederick laughed under his breath. "Should have gone to you for therapy instead."

Instead? "What?"

"Nothing. I..." He looked at the clock over the stove. "I suppose I could still manage it. If I hurry."

"It's not even four-thirty. It's a twenty minute drive to the harbor."

Frederick looked him, specifically his clothes, up and down with an exaggerated expression.

Will gave the expression right back. "Tick-tock, Cinderella."

"Fine. You just volunteered to put all this away for me, Fairy Godmother." Frederick set the olive jar down with a clack as he spun around and headed off to the stairs. Not looking back, he added, "By the way, Will, I didn't take you for a snoop. I never mentioned the aquarium."

Will smiled, glad Frederick couldn't see it.

**

Almost two hours later, Will was starting to wonder if Frederick was intentionally procrastinating. Not that he cared either way. He had merely made a suggestion. Frederick would either go to this pompous party or not. No skin off Will's back.

What the hell is he doing up there?

At one point he had heard stomping down the stairs, following by Frederick, wrapped in a bathrobe, disappearing into the laundry room with a white shirt. Ten minutes later he had been back up the stairs…then down again to retrieve something else from the laundry room and the hall closet.

Lowering his head to read the same sentence for the fifth time, he gave up and slapped the file closed. He wasn't going to get any reading done with Frederick flying around like a humming bird. He grabbed Mocha's ear-wash from the kitchen counter and headed upstairs. A little canine medical intervention would give him something to do.

"Oh no. No, stay over there!" Frederick's voice traveled down the upstairs hall as Will reached the landing. "I didn't just finish brushing that for you to get hair on it now."

Will came to the open door of Frederick's room and almost laughed at the sight. Mocha and Maggie were both lying on Frederick's bed, paws in front of them, heads up and tails

wagging in readiness. Probably to block him the moment he tried to leave the room. Frederick was still in his bathrobe, hair already styled and his scar artfully subdued. He stood before the open double doors of his closet, looking back and forth between two tuxedo jackets hanging on either side. He stepped forward and ran his fingers down the satin lapel of one—the one Will was sure he had seen that first night, when Frederick borrowed the SUV—before he turned to the other. From the look on his face, one would swear he was making a life or death decision.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone who took two hours to get dressed."

Frederick gave a startled gasp, then tried to cover it with a scoff. "Trust me, you have. You're just not there for it."

He was probably right. "Suit yourself. You're going to be late."

"Better late than early," Frederick muttered, returning to his tense back and forth between the suits. "I wish I knew who was in charge of the planning this year. It would give me a better idea of what they expect with the dress code."

"It said black tie."

"There are variations on black tie. Modern, traditional, avant-garde. Black tie at the opera is not the same as black tie at a gallery opening, or a banquet." He lifted the sleeve on one coat, biting his lip. "Maybe I shouldn't go."

Oh for the love of... "Just pick one. They're both tuxedos, you'll look fine."

"'*Fine.*'" Frederick sneered. "Just because you would look good in a potato sack doesn't mean the rest of us are so lucky. We poor mortals have to put in some effort."

Will pressed his lips together and waited. One, two, thr—Frederick froze, his hand stopping midair to one of the suits as his words must have finally caught up to his brain. He snatched one of the suits down and headed for the bathroom.

"I have to get dressed. A little privacy, if you don't mind?"

Will tilted his head. "Are you comparing my clothes to potato sacks? That's not nice, Frederick."

"It's just a figure of speech. Now, if you please—"

"Or are you suggesting I *wear* a potato sack? Since you think I would look good—"

"Get out! My God, were you raised in a barn?" Frederick darted into the bathroom and slammed the door, causing Maggie to hop up with a playful bark.

Will walked over to the closet and the remaining tuxedo, pretending he couldn't hear Frederick's clipped Spanish grumbling from the bathroom…or feel the warm flush rising up his own neck. The tuxedo still hanging on the closet door was the one he remembered seeing

Frederick in before, the more modern one with the single smooth edged lapel rather than the old fashioned pointed lapels of the other.

He had always thought those wide, pointed lapels and exaggerated shoulders looked terrible on Frederick. He just didn't used to care.

Will called the dogs, shaking the drug store bag like it contained treats rather than ear medicine. They followed, but he stopped to knock on the bathroom door.

"*Ay Dios,* what?!"

"The other suit that's out here, that's the one you wore a few weeks ago, right? When I showed up?"

There was a long pause, then, "Yes. So?"

"So you should wear that one." Will smirked as if Frederick could see it. "You looked good."

The silence that followed was expected, and for the best. Will had no idea what he would have done otherwise.

He seemed to have little idea what he was doing lately.

**

Another half hour passed before Frederick left, avoiding eye contact with a dismissive wave over his shoulder that wasn't fooling anyone. Will poured himself a glass of Frederick's bourbon—really, he deserved it—and went back to his research. He had the place to himself now, peace and quiet.

His mind wandered.

Despite the very nature of his consultant work, he wasn't accustomed to giving people advice. He was even less accustomed to people taking it. On the few occasions he had tried, earnestly, to sway someone to a decision, he had been ignored more often than not. People, especially Jack, had an infuriating tendency to take his casual observations to heart while pushing back when he became assertive…or when what he said contradicted what they wanted to hear.

And since Frederick had definitely left the house in the second suit, this made the fourth time he had followed Will's advice. Well, not entirely. When he had told Frederick to go to Jack and confess everything, to tell him all he knew about Hannibal as well as his own ethical lapses, Frederick had gone but only in half measures. He hadn't confessed. He had told Jack everything else, showed him the audio recordings of Will and Abel's conversations, etc. But, the confession part…

When Frederick felt scared or threatened, he became shortsighted. He wrapped himself in denials and deflections, almost always making the situation worse for himself. Will snorted, taking a sip of bourbon. It was that poor skill at lying, again. After Gideon escaped and he and Alana had gone to talk to—no, gone to intimate and accuse—Frederick, Will had made the mistake of seeing an easy, smarmy blowhard casting aspersions anywhere but at himself. And Frederick had done all that, but there had been nothing easy about it. His cheeks had been flushed, his hands twitchy, and if they had pressed just a few minutes longer than they had Will knew, now, Frederick would have shattered.

Professional pressure was one thing, but it was social pressure Frederick couldn't manage. He just didn't have the blood lust in him. That tiny drop of sadism that allowed some people to thrive on confrontation and verbal blood sport, he just didn't have it. He could fool himself into believing he did, sweating through the battle for a while, or when someone was right there encouraging him. But on his own, when the volleys came, he had always…he couldn't…

Shit.

"Shit!"

Will flopped back in the chair, pressing his palms hard against his eyes. Maybe there was a reason he rarely gave advice, and an even better reason why people didn't listen to him: He was an idiot.

****

Last time I take that idiot's advice…

Frederick turned the champagne flute between his fingers and watched the little crocodile swish back along the edge of the tank. The glass wall stopped at chin height, giving the illusion that one of the creatures within could slide out over the edge toward you at any moment. Of course, they couldn't. A screen of well blended gray plastic skimmed the surface of the water, just out of sight. The illusion was impressive though, almost enough to make him forget that the animals weren't the only thing on display tonight.

"Why Dr. Chilton. You're here. Mmm."

"Must say, surprised to see you out and about, after… Well."

"You can hardly notice it! I'd heard it was much worse."

"On your own tonight, Frederick? Huh. Last minute, I'm sure."

Honestly, he hated how much the last one stung. Out of everything that had happened last year, all the potential ammunition, mentioning his lack of a date seemed ridiculously petty. And all that had happened in his first few minutes past the entryway! He had smiled and

rolled his eyes as if the very subject of a *date* held no interest, then wandered off with a feigned sighting of someone he knew.

He had been staring at a fresh water crocodile he didn't know for fifteen minutes.

"Lucky bastard." He threw back the rest of his champagne and just stopped himself from setting the empty glass on a nearby ledge.

The ledge was in fact a meticulously crafted boulder meant to simulate one of the rocky desert habitats of Australia. The entire multi-level environment— complete with waterfalls, living plants, fallen log overhangs, and massive tanks of fish and reptiles—was contained inside a great glass pavilion three stories high. It was all rather impressive, in an immersive theater sort of way. He probably would have enjoyed it under different circumstances.

He fixed his posture and gave a cordial nod to Doctor and Mrs. Bolling as they came around the curve of another rock face. They both faltered in their steps at the sight of him, before forcing tense smiles and quickly moving on.

Good God, he wanted to go home.

He couldn’t, of course. The only thing worse than staying would be leaving within the first hour with his tail plainly tucked between his legs. He had anticipated snarky comments, prying questions, perhaps even pity, but he hadn't thought to prepare himself for being ignored.

"I feel like we're in a fish bowl."

Frederick turned to the soft spoken words. A beautiful young woman, perhaps in her early 30s, with wavy chestnut hair swept elegantly over one shoulder, approached from the same direction in which the Bollings had just vanished. She cradled a martini glass between her fingers, taking a sip as she seemed to examine the crocodiles. Not a hint of her blood red lipstick transferred to the glass, which was impressive.

“It is a rather unique experience,” he offered, looking up to the glass ceiling twenty feet above. Beyond the stone overhangs and draping vegetation, the glass walls revealed the lights of the city a few hundred yards away.

“Maybe it’s intentional. A little subconscious fair play.” She leaned closer to the tank, where the crocodile turned its head as if to give her an annoyed side-eye. She smirked. “We watch them and…something watches us.”

Frederick gave a polite laugh. Saying he wasn’t sure if anything—anyone—was watching them felt too intense for polite talk with a stranger. Even a stranger who suddenly seemed oddly familiar.

He lifted his glass, remembered it was empty, and made a casual glance along both directions of the walkway. There was no one within sight that he could see, no tittering group of so-called professional doctors waiting for their friend to report back.

“This isn’t middle school, Dr. Chilton. I wasn’t sent over here to talk to you.”

Frederick felt his cheeks grow hot. “What? No, I didn’t think—”

“You did, but don’t worry. It may not be middle school, but it isn’t much better.” She stepped closer, cupping her hand near her mouth with a devilish smile. “With a few exceptions, I don't much like doctors. No offense.”

Frederick laughed despite himself. “None taken. We’re used to it. I’m—” But she already knew who he was. She had said his name. “Pleased to meet you, Miss…”

“Margot.” She extended her hand, which he cupped between his own briefly before the name —one he was sure he had read multiple times— zapped him like a static spark.

“Ms. Verger.” His eyes must have gone wide, judging from her amused expression.

“I go by Misses now. Mrs. Verger-Bloom.” She raised her left hand to show a wedding band and a trio of square-cut rubies glistening in an antique gold setting. It should have looked gaudy, but Frederick had a feeling the woman before him was an old hand at bringing refinement to everything she touched.

“Of course.” *Alana is here*. Why the hell hadn’t he thought of that? “Congratulations. Belated.”

She gave a soft laugh, really more of a knowing smile, and hooked her arm through his. “Have you seen the walkway over the big waterfall? The view is impressive on both sides."

Something dangerous prickled against his skin, and he had the absurd thought that Alana wouldn't like him speaking to her wife. Still, he went with no resistance, the weight of her arm tucked against his a kind comfort. At least someone was talking to him.

But *why* was she talking to him?

They stepped out of the habitat to ascend two escalators, passing only three other guests along the way. It appeared almost everyone was still in the main gallery, downing cocktails and catching up on the sort of gossip that didn't pass the professional standard at conferences. They emerged on the top level to another tank, this one at least seven feet high and twice as large as the first. Around the outcropping of boulders next to it, a long silver metal walkway spanned the open air between the waterfall and the glass outer wall of the pavilion. Reaching the railing, he looked over to where they had been standing minutes before, some thirty feet below.

"Not that impressive, in the grand scheme of things," she observed with a shrug, "but I like it."

"It's simple," he agreed, and was genuinely surprised he did. It wasn’t as if they were on one of the glass walkways in China, or viewing Angel Falls in person. It was just an aquarium. A tourist attraction designed to appeal to children on field trips. Still, he liked it. "They didn't try too hard with the illusion. You can see the skyline and the tanker boats."

"Exactly. No point in trying to cover up what's impossible to cover up. We're in Baltimore, not Australia. Better to own the fact and work it into the experience." She tilted her face to all the glass surrounding them. "When you try to ignore something that is obviously there, you just end up looking foolish."

Frederick frowned, almost taking a step back. "Are we still talking about the fish tanks?"

"No."

"Are we talking about me?"

"Yes." She gave him that knowing smile again. "But you are the *something* everyone is trying to ignore, and they're looking pretty damn foolish for the effort."

He smiled, but didn't feel it. "I don't think they're the ones who look foolish. As I'm sure Dr. Bloom will agree later, I shouldn't have come here tonight. Though, I do thank you for the company."

"I'm glad you did. You're the only member of our little club I hadn't met. I admit, I've been curious."

"Club." He didn't say the word as a question. They both knew what she meant.

"A merry band we are, huh? His *survivors."* She drew out the word with sarcastic reverence. "I even met Agent Crawford, eventually, through all the aftermath and investigations."

Frederick worked to keep his expression neutral. The fact he had once wanted that commiseration and 'club membership' so badly, only to turn away from the inevitably rejection, left a bitter taste in his mouth. Dry and rotting, like the bouquet of flowers he had abandoned in Will's hospital room.

"I'm not sure if I qualify for the honor." He forced a laugh. "Han—He never inflicted any of my injuries on me himself."

Her faded smile vanished completely. "He didn't rip out my uterus himself either, but he made sure it happened."

Frederick's stomach lurched, sending a warm reminder of champagne to the back of his throat. Questions screamed in his head, but he couldn't ask them. He could only replay her words and realize, with sickening certainly, that a sentence like that in relation to Hannibal felt easily believable. Almost mundane.

Hannibal didn't just steal organs and lives. He stole normalcy.

"I didn't realize, I—I'm sorry."

She patted his arm. "It's done. He may not have held the scalpel, but it was his plan. Just like this"—she brushed her fingers over his left cheek, just shy of touching—"was his plan too."

His gaze dropped to her stomach before he caught himself and pulled it back up. She was smirking at him again.

"Since you're too polite to ask why, I'll tell you anyway." She reaffirmed her arm around his and led them further along the walkway, deeper into the hum of the waterfall. "It was punishment. I used something of his without permission."

He wished he could be surprised. Nothing involving Hannibal surprised him anymore. "I assume you don't mean a nice fountain pen, or borrowing a car."

She laughed, raising her glass to him as if to compliment the line. "Not quite. In my defense, I didn't know he, eh…claimed ownership at the time. Did you check your seating for dinner?"

He frowned at the shift in topic. "No. I ran to hide in here before I got the chance."

She raised her brow, perhaps impressed by the honesty. "I think I'll go down and mastermind a little rearranging so you can join us."

"Oh, no. No, that's unnecessary. Thank you, but I doubt very much Dr. Bloom would appreciate—"

"Speaking of fountain pens and borrowed cars," she cut in suddenly.

"Excuse me?"

"Hello, Will."

She was no longer looking at him, but smiling at something over his shoulder. Frederick spun around so fast his knee popped. There, standing at the head of the walkway, his hand resting light on the railing, was Will. He wore a black tuxedo of traditional cut, complete with a black bowtie and silk waistcoat. His hair, usually a riot of curls over his forehead, had been combed into a sophisticated side-part and swoop. He hadn't shaved his beard, and he looked all the better for it.

Frederick let out a long, deep breath. *Potato sack, indeed.*

Then the part of his brain that was not a leering traitor snapped him back to reality.

"Hello, Margot." Will moved swiftly toward them, his hand already outstretched. But instead of reaching for Margot's hand, Will placed it casually on Frederick's shoulder.

Oh, God… "Will, what ar—"

"I said I would be late, and I am." He shrugged, slipped his free hand into his pocket. "Just in time for dinner."

Words failed him, or any words he felt he could say with an audience. He looked to Margot, who regarded them both with narrow, amused eyes.

"Happy to see you, Will. I was just telling the good doctor he should join our table for dinner. Any objections?"

Frederick twitched as a bead of sweat slid down his spine.

"None." Will's almost-smile seemed just as knowing at hers. "I think I saw Alana on the way in?"

"Uh-huh. And did she, by chance, see you?"

"I don't think so."

Margot's smile spread to a full grin. "In that case, the pleasure is all mine. If you'll excuse me, gentlemen." She released Frederick's arm with a friendly pat and moved off, her silky floor length gown swishing behind her like water. They both watched until she disappeared behind the rock face.

"What the *hell—"*

"Shh." Will mouthed the sound, dropping his hand from his shoulder to motion for quiet.

"Don't shush me! What are you doing here?"

"Ringing in the new year?"

"Try again."

"After you left, I..." He made a show of wincing. "I started to think that maybe I hadn't given you the best advice."

"Oh, is that all?" Frederick laughed, laying on as much sarcasm as he could muster. "Don't be too hard on yourself. I'm the idiot who took social advice from a hermit!"

"I take it things aren't going well."

Frederick hoped his sour expression was answer enough. "So, you came here to..."

"Lend moral support?" Will seemed amused by the possibility himself. "Or maybe serve as a decoy. They won't know which of us to sneer at first."

It was doubtful there would be much sneering in Will's direction, not when the psychiatric community still considered him a prize for study. But even if Will's presence did nothing to improve interactions with the other guests, he was still grateful. Suddenly, embarrassingly grateful.

And confused.

Will was there to help him. Him? Will Graham had cleaned himself up and come to a place filled with doctors who would like nothing more than to peer inside his skull all for...him?

Frederick cleared his throat, coughed, and covered his mouth as if the motion would do a damn thing to hide the warmth flooding his cheeks. He was so wrapped up in his ridiculous reaction that he almost missed the sight of his shoes on Will's feet.

"Those are my shoes."

Will stepped back as if to check. "So they are."

"But that's not my tux."

"No. Yours was too wide in the shoulders." Will's lips twitched. "And the pants were far too short."

"Ha-ha. You're not that much taller than me. So where did you g— That's my shirt too. And my cufflinks!"

Will raised his brow. "What did you expect? I don't keep freshly ironed black-tie ensembles in the back of my car. And you're only a half shoe size bigger than me."

"Well, what a boon for you!" *And for me.* Still, he felt compelled to feign offense. It was better than the alternative. "Alright, fine, but where did you get this suit? That's not something you grabbed last minute out of Neiman Marcus."

"I've never been in Neiman Marcus."

"I was being generous. So?"

Will's shifted his eyes to the waterfall. "It doesn't matter. I knew where I could get a tux quickly that would fit close enough. Is there anything in particular I need to know about the people here tonight? Anyone I should make a point to avoid?"

Like he was avoiding this subject? It was just a tux, as he said, there was no reason to be cagey about it. Although, it was a rather fine one. In fact, the closer Frederick looked, the finer it became, and more familiar. The way the buttons on the waistcoat caught the light was a tell-tale feature of real onyx. The sharp divot in the lapels was the sort only achieved with hand-stitching, and that wool… Frederick had handled that kind of velvety perfection only a few times, usually in awe before he had forced himself to walk away from a price tag that would send him into grief counseling.

He had seen that tux, he was sure of it, in the vague part of his life *Before.* Before Gideon killed his nurse, before he met Will or Alana, before Freddie Lounds had ever written his name in anything. When he was new to Baltimore and still flying high on his success in acquiring the Director's position, when he had thrown himself in to Baltimore society—too clumsily, he now knew—and he had attended the opera and the symphony and every charity banquet to which he could manage an invitation. He had seen *that tux.*

"That's Hannibal's."

Will's eyes flashed with alarm, quickly tamped down. "It's just a suit, Frederick. It doesn't matter."

“How did you get that?” Frederick tried to keep his voice even, empty, but it was proving a battle. A tight ball was forming in his chest, clenching down like a spring ready to snap.

Will sighed. “I still have a key.”

“A key.”

“Yes.”

“They didn’t change the locks!?”

“Not all of them.”

“Oh my God…”

Will darted his eyes both ways down the walkway to make sure they were alone. “Frederick, really, it *doesn’t matter*. Don’t freak out.”

“I am not freaking out.” But he was close. This…this couldn’t actually be happening. It was too…too…

“So let me get this straight,” he began, raising a finger. “You broke into Hannibal’s house—”

“I had a key.”

“—which is still a crime scene—”

“CSU finished, so not technically.”

“—you stole his nine thousand dollar Brioni tux—”

“*How* much?”

“—and now you’re wearing it here, tonight, to help…me?”

A long silence followed, permeated only by the waterfall and the thundering of Frederick’s heart in his ears. Will closed his eyes and and sighed.

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

The spring snapped, and Frederick belted what was perhaps the ugliest laugh of his life.

“Is this you not freaking out?”

Frederick struggled to breathe through his laugher, which was now reaching the point of full body wiggling. Good God, he wanted to hop around like an idiot. He wanted to grab the man in front of him and ki—shake him senseless!

“No, Will, this is me being *delighted*! You stole Hannibal’s tux so you could keep *me* company at an event Hannibal attended every year as the goddamned prom queen center of

attention! Do you have any idea how he would react to this? Ugh, of course you do. He would *hate* this!”

“I don’t think I’ve seen this version of *schaudenfreude* on you before.” Despite the words, there was no real disapproval in Will’s voice. If anything, he sounded impressed.

Frederick wiped at his bad eye, which had started to tear. “What can I say? I’m a small, petty man, Will, and this has made my night. I think I've earned some 'shameful joy' at Hannibal's expense.”

Will glanced in the direction of the exit again. “Do you think anyone else will recognize it?”

“Mmm, Alana might. She would have seen him wear it and she has an eye for such things.”

“Great.”

"I can just imagine what kind of dramatic conclusion she'll leap to. Something suitably tragic, like you *missing* him." He rolled his eyes hard. "She's developed a habit of thinking the worst of everyone."

Will expression grew tight. "She has good reason."

"Yes, the reason being that it's easier for her to deal with herself when she can imagine everyone else is worse."

"Frederick." Will dropped his voice, the warning unmistakable. "You don't know her. There's a lot of it you don't know."

He lifted his chin, irritated by the sudden shift in mood, but Will's expression had him biting back a quick retort. He didn't just look angry, he looked insistent, almost pleading.

And he was right. There was so much of it he didn't know.

"True, I don't know her very well," he started, gauging Will's response, "but I know myself, and she's doing what I did. I never used to think well of anyone. Everyone had questionable motives, everyone was trying to get something. Career, money, power. I never had to...to think too much about what I was doing because I was so sure everyone else was doing the same, or worse."

Will stared at him long enough that Frederick began to squirm. Why the hell did he say that?

"So you're saying you know what it's like."

Wait. "What?"

Will gave him a wry smile. "That's called empathy, Doctor. You have been in her shoes, maybe you should act like it."

Frederick balked. “You can’t possibly be comparing—”

"You just did." Will reached out and plucked the empty glass from his fingers, tipping it upside down. “I think we could both use a drink.”

Frederick huffed at the sneaky shift in subject, but so much the better. Any discussion of empathy would inevitably lead to the fact that he never got a drop of it, so why the hell should he dole it out? No, he was going to enjoy himself, *and* the site of Hannibal’s absurdly expensive suit draped across Will’s shoulders…and hugging his legs surprisingly well. When the night was over, maybe that fine silken wool could be repurposed to something suitably degrading. Visions of scissors and jagged squares of precious Italian wool dancing his head, the perfect size for wiping kitchen surfaces or cleaning a disgusting infected dog ear.

“You look very pleased with yourself,” Will observed, again sounding more curious than disapproving.

Frederick let out an indulgent sigh. “Guilty.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Probably, but I would rather not risk you trying to stop me.” Frederick laughed at the flash of surprise on Will’s face.

A series of soft chimes echoed through the pavilion from the speaker system.

“That will be the dinner call.” Frederick cringed and eyed the empty class in Will’s hand. “Stop me when I’ve had ten?”

Will looked toward the exit like it was the gallows. “If I don’t get there first.”

**

Guests flowed along the main gallery, a dark gray concourse that crossed the water to the adjacent Pier 4 building of the aquarium. The walls were adorned with ceiling height murals of the most vibrant tropical birds and glittering deep sea creatures, but Frederick paid about as much attention to them as everyone else was.

Oh, people were pretending, they just weren't doing a very good job.

Frederick shot another nervous glance at Will, who perused the murals and the harbor beyond as if he hadn't a care in a world, but Frederick didn't believe for one second he was oblivious. Will was an intelligent man, almost mystically observant, so there was no way in hell he didn't notice the way people were looking at them. The hesitation, the wide eyed recognition, that sudden glint of anticipated gossip...

They thought Will was there with him.

Not standing next to him, but *with* him.

Suddenly he was twelve again, going to his seventh grade Halloween dance stag because it was all about the costumes and sheet pizza. His mom had to work again, leaving him to catch a ride with his neighbor Nicole. Other kids saw them getting out of the same car and assumed they were there together, which Nicole had not liked. She had instantly, and viciously, assured everyone that she was totally not dating 'Fredo' and she only gave him a ride because their moms were friends.

Frederick drew a deep breath, huffing at himself. He was forty-three years old, for God's sake, and this wasn't middle school. But, as Margot had so helpfully observed, it wasn't much better either. He kept waiting for Will to shift away from him, to find an excuse to talk to someone else. Or, as would better suit what he knew about him, just turn around and leave.

The gratitude he had been feeling only minutes before began to waver as he consider all the reasons why Will being there was a terrible idea. The first among many being that damn Tattle Crime article. The likelihood they would leave without Alana mentioning something to reveal the whole thing was slim to none.

Oh well. The company was good while it lasted. Frederick's palms felt clammy.

They soon reached a large space at the corner of the building that had been decked out with round tables and a catering bar to one side. Wide windows on both walls showed the harbor and city, the glittering lights and dark gray interior further empathizing the feeling of being a fish in a darkened tank. The ceiling cut through two levels, with the second floor balcony and stairs to one side. The open space above had been filled with an array of peach colored jelly fish models, all hung with near invisible strings in different orientations and movements, making it appeared as if a massive school was moving through the room around them.

"Oh." Frederick hummed his approval, unthinking.

Will looked up. "This isn't what I imagined a medical association party would look like."

Frederick scoffed. "It usually doesn't. Windowless gilded banquet halls and the opera house lobby. They must have finally let someone under sixty do the planning."

A pretty young woman dressed in caterers' whites and holding a clipboard stopped in front of Will with a blinding smile. "I can show you to your table, sir. Name?"

"I'm not on the list. Probably Chilton, plus one."

Frederick thought his cheeks might burn off his face.

"Oh?" She consulted the clipboard, then looked between the two men before landing back on Will. She seemed downright crestfallen.

Oh for God's sake...

"They're with us. A last minute change." Margot seemed to materialize out of thin air at Will's side, flashing a dismissive smile at the attendant as she took Will's arm. "We're just over here."

She led them smoothly through the tables and right into the waiting court of Alana's hard stare. She wore a beautiful Grecian style gown of emerald silk with flecks of gold catching the light, though the dress wasn't glistening nearly as much as her eyes.

"Frederick." She tilted her head. "I would say I wasn't expecting to see you tonight, but that would be an understatement now that Will is here too." She turned her wide, speaking eyes to him. Though speaking didn't quite cover the impression. There was a whole speech waiting in that gaze.

"Good to see you too, Alana." Will finally set the empty champagne glass on the table. Margot's eyes went to it.

"I could use a drink. How about you, Doctor? Keep me company?"

"Well I—" But she was already pulling him away, tucked in close enough to her side to hear her mischievous little laugh. Frederick huffed. "I'm beginning to feel a bit managed, Mrs. Verger."

They reached the makeshift bar where she made an obvious act of maneuvering him so his back was to Alana and Will. She also made a point of looking that way and smirking. "You should, because I am. And please, call me Margot."

He took one of the ready filled champagne glasses. "Frederick."

She hummed thoughtfully. "I think I'll stick with doctor, if that's alright. I already know one psychiatrist I started calling by his first name, and that went downhill quickly."

He sputtered over his glass, thankful he had managed only the barest of sips. "Superstitions aside, I assure you that any use or non-use of Han—of his first name had nothing to do with the 'downhill' part." He took a proper drink, now wishing he had ordered something stronger. No doubt he would need it for the aftermath of whatever Will and Alana were discussing now.

"So what did?"

He looked up. "I'm sorry?"

"What did cause Hannibal's 'downhill part'?"

He shot her an incredulous look, which seemed to only amuse her further. Was she asking for his professional analysis of Hannibal? Lay down his motivations and pathology in a few sentences under the glare of the fish tanks? Even if he had something to offer—and to his professional embarrassment, he did not—it would be impossible to lay out so briefly. No. Her smirk all but confirmed she knew it was impossible, but she wanted to see if he would try. She wanted to see if his reputation as a pompous, self assured know-it-all would pan out.

Fine.

He downed half the glass. "I'll tell you, but you must promise to keep it secret."

She took her new martini from the bartender blindly, her eyes and smile never leaving Frederick's face. "Do tell."

He leaned in, projecting all the seriousness he could, and said, "It was the rhyming. *Cann-i-bal*. His sense of poetry and aesthetics left him little choice. Doomed from the day his birth certificate was stamped."

Margot's eyes went wide a second before she erupted with laughter. Frederick did his best to hold a serious expression.

"No, I'm serious. It's a fascinating progression. I'm writing a, eh, a whole paper on the subject."

The words brought a new volley, drawing attention from other guests and leaving Frederick stuck in that awkward mix of embarrassment and pride. There was always something viscerally satisfying about making another person laugh, one of the most banal and yet grand human accomplishments. He had felt it that night next to his car with Will.

And, judging from the impressed look on her sobering face, she seemed to have needed it. Just like Will.

"Gallows humor, doctor? I was beginning to wonder if you had it." She looked back toward their table. "Not everyone does."

He wondered if she was referring to Alana, Will, or both. "I would like to sit for dinner now, unless Dr. Bloom isn't quite finished with her interrogation." He finally turned enough to look over his shoulder and wasn't surprised to see Alana and Will speaking in tense, if hushed, words. She didn't appear to be glaring at his suit, however, which was at least one turn in their favor.

"Aren't you going to get a drink for your date?" Margot chuckled as she took a second glass from the bartender. "It would be the polite thing to do."

"No, it's not like that. Will, eh...he just wanted to—"

"Your ears get very pink. And your nose a little bit too. Did you know that?"

Frederick closed his eyes. Constant humiliation. It was the universe's grand plan for him, past, present, and future.

He shot a hard look to the bartender. "I need a whiskey neat, please. Actually, make that two. Doubles."

If Margot had decided he was going to be her source of entertainment for the evening, so be it. He finished off his champagne, retrieved his two drinks from the bartender, and headed back to the table with Margot at his side.

The room was filling up and guests were taking their seats as several people hovered around a raised podium in the corner. Frederick had almost forgotten about the ever present speeches that came with these gatherings, although calling them speeches was perhaps too much

credit. They were usually a rundown of notable accomplishments and awards over the past year, interspersed with polite applause and snarky whispers.

He waited for Alana and Margot to sit before taking a place one chair down from Alana. Will filled the space between. He placed the drinks down and slid one over to Will, who promptly picked it up.

"You must have the 'whiskey neat' look, Will.” Margot smiled, her brow lifting in a question. “Dr. Chilton didn't even hesitate with the order."

Frederick's food-empty stomach swirled around the alcohol. Straight whiskey was the only thing he had known Will to drink in the house, but he wasn't about to say *that.*

Will shrugged. "If I have any looks that would be one of them."

Alana began unwrapping the linen from her silverware. "They say that in times of panic or high stress, people can notice the most innocuous things while completely missing others. You always did have a bottle of whiskey out somewhere in your house, Will." She leaned forward a bit, eyes on Frederick. "Maybe that's when you saw it. You know, high stress times and all?"

Angry heat crawled up Frederick's back. It was hardly the first time she had felt the need to remind him of a horrible moment in his life; *‘Pulled more than that out of you.’*

“It’s possible. What innocuous things did you notice in that upstairs room? The col—” Will’s hand landed on his thigh in a firm grip. The rest of Frederick’s venomous retort felt kicked out of him by the sudden pounding of his heart.

Surely kicking someone under the table was more traditional!

Alana pasted on a smile. "I noticed he didn't have double paned windows."

Jesus...

Will's hand tightened where it still lay, as if to stop Frederick from responding, but he had no response. What was it he and Alana were even doing? One upping each other for the mantle of victimhood? Maybe she just hated him so much that she resented the fact she had anything in common with him, including victimhood. No, neither of those made sense, otherwise she would be downplaying the clownish procession of traumas he had suffered, not intentionally bringing them up.

Frederick reached for his own silverware, yanking off the stupid decorate napkin ring. He had already had too much to drink for fucking *conflict analysis.*

Will finally removed his hand, leaving Frederick to curl his toes in his shoe and pretend he couldn't feel the fading warmth on his thigh. Alana turned to speak closely with Margot, leaving Will to lean toward him.

"You're not good with confrontation."

What. The. Hell.

See his reaction, Will sighed. "It's not an insult. You just...Don't get into a battle of words with Alana."

Frederick clenched his napkin as he lowered it to his lap and spat in a whisper, "Oh? Why, because I might say something true and hurt her *feelings?* You don't give her much credit."

"If you did manage to hurt her 'feelings', you wouldn't know it because she has a better poker face than you too." Will leaned in closer, enough that Frederick's angry inhale came with an unexpected current of oakmoss and rosewood. Paco Rabanne.

That's my cologne.

"Frederick?"

He's wearing my *cologne.*

"Are you listening?"

"Yes, of course I am." Frederick reached for his glass and took a too-large sip of whiskey. "I have a terrible poker face, blah-blah."

"After that. Listen, like I said before, you don't know everything."

He finally looked away from the safety triangle of napkin-plate-glass and met Will's eyes. Where had expected to see more warning, and perhaps a bit of anger, he saw entreaty. And he understood; Alana was his friend, and she had been through Hell. But who hadn't?

"Just give her some time."

"Fine."

"If you keep making it easy for her to be hostile, she's never going to see anything wrong with it."

"You really should send Jack your resignation. Your talents as a middle school guidance counselor are going to waste."

Will tilted his head. "Are you the middle school child in this scenario?"

"For fuck's sake, Will, she started it!"

That that words remained a harsh whisper, and thus beyond Alana and Margot's ability to decipher, did nothing to lessen his instant, scalding embarrassment. All three were now staring at him, having heard *something*, but it was Will who moved his jaw and back and forth in an effort to keep from laughing.

Thankfully, the catering staff had chosen that moment to arrive. They moved between the tables with push carts loaded with large serving dishes, which they placed on the turn tables

—Frederick would always think of them as Lazy Susans. His mother had kept one—at the center of each table. He had almost forgotten the dinner tonight was being served *en famille* style

Margot, who had probably been served plated meals by domestic staff for as long as she could remember, looked the most amused. She leaned over and whispered something to Alana, who smiled and made a motion with her hand like a school lunch lady slapping mashed potatoes onto a tray. Margot laughed and brushed her wife's arm.

Frederick doubted he would ever be on friendly terms with Alana, but he couldn't begrudge her the happiness she had found. Envy, after all, is its own kind of empathy.

The speeches that no one really wanted to hear started over the clink of cutlery and soft hum of continued conversation. Frederick loaded his plate with various roasted vegetables and Indian rice with no care to keeping them separate or presentable. In fact, as he looked down at the plate, then up to the hodgepodge of dishes and serving spoons cluttering the center of the round table, he smiled.

"It's better than stag horns."

Alana snapped her eyes to him. "What?"

"Or the tortoise skull. Did you see that one?" He had the strange sense he was thinking aloud rather than speaking to anyone as he intentionally dumped a spoonful right on top of his seared asparagus. Hannibal would hate that. And Alana, who probably wanted no reminders of that bastard's dinner table, was going to leap over the table and kill him any second.

Or maybe not.

"It was in the tortoise shell, like a bowl," she said, staring at him.

"With a bunch of flowers. Black and purple flowers," Frederick added. He could still smell the black wizard lilies, could still remember marveling over the extravagance of a tortoiseshell full of plucked flowers that sold for fifteen dollars a bloom.

"Baby bird skeletons." Will helding his glass a few inches from his lips, his words echoing slightly along the crystal. "In a nest filled with ginger slices." He took a drink. "Which he took out with chopsticks and ate during the meal."

Alana made a sound that was half amused, half disgusted. That one sounded too extreme for Hannibal's public facade. No doubt he had saved his best macabre creations for his private meals with Will. Or Gideon.

"Deer antlers," Frederick continued, almost enjoying the morbid memory game now. "Severed and coming out—"

"Coming out of the mouth of the deer's skull?" Alana laughed mirthlessly. "At least, I think it was a deer skull. You saw that one too?"

"Unfortunately."

Alana took a hard swallow of her drink and faced him, both of them, more directly. “The deer skull, the back teeth… I thought once that it looked like some of them had work on them. Enamel fillings, maybe a crown. I dismissed it then, but do you think they were…Do you think they *were*?”

Frederick wasn't sure if Margot had ever dined with Hannibal, but the rest of them had eaten human beings at his table more than once. After that, a few human teeth in the centerpiece was downright G-rated. Still his skin prickled. It was one thing to have it hidden in the sauce or sliced indistinguishable from pork, and quite another to have it boldly placed in front of you where any medical professional should have at least asked a question.

They all should have asked so many questions.

“They were,” Will’s voice was flat, distant. “Price ID’ed a man who went missing in Annapolis about six years ago. A dentist.”

"I guess that's the poetic streak," Margot drawled as she turned the lazy Susan with one finger. The table went silent at the same time a smattering of polite applause filled the room for whatever the current speaker was talking about.

Alana stared daggers are her plate while Will seemed to be staring off at nothing. Margot caught Frederick's eye across the table with an open expression of *see what you did?*

Well, Will did tell him to make it awkward. And he had actually been enjoying the back and forth, morbid though it was. *Good job, Frederick.* He grabbed his fork, ready to eat if nothing else, then paused as he reached for the salt shaker.

He snorted a laugh.

Will blinked out of wherever he had gone. “What?”

He dangled the salt shaker between his fingers. “Here’s something no one ever saw on his table." He sprinkled probably too much across his roasted vegetables. "And believe me, I looked for it more than once."

"Did you ever ask?" Alana tilted her head in what seemed genuine curiosity.

Will made a strange sound, shaking his head. "Altering something he prepared, right in front of him? He would have considered that rude."

"No, I didn't dare, and all my meals with him were before I suspected anything." Frederick laughed, stabbing his fork into a slice of yellow squash. "If they don't get him for multiple murder, they can go after his criminally bland treatment of potatoes."

Alana coughed, or so it seemed. She brought the back of her hand to cover a wide, pressed smile. She "coughed" again, turning away as her shoulders shook, and Frederick felt like he had won a prize.

Will was smiling now too. A small, shifting expression, like something he was reluctant to let out. "He, eh...He made fish once using an indigenous Hawaiian method with coconut shell

coals and palm leaves. It took three hours. And during dinner I just *really* wanted to put tartar sauce on it."

Frederick lost it. Just imaging the look that would have crossed Hannibal's face, that barely detectable tightening around the eyes, and Will sitting there in his dog hair flannel shirt asking for tartar sauce, was too much. He leaned against the table, laughing until tears came to his eyes. *Ay Dios*, maybe he had pushed his limit with the drinks. He never laughed so much in public, never smiled too widely. Never did anything to look uncontrolled or unrefined. Before.

Will's smile broke then, slow and total, like sunlight cutting through clouds. His cheeks, which Frederick had only ever seen in porcelain and blue, took on two high spots of color, like peaches.

Frederick could have bounced in his seat, but he hadn't lost *that* much control of himself. That, and his professional instincts had started to scream that this was not healthy, even detrimental. He had taken so many steps to keep Hannibal out of his life and his thoughts, and yet here he was again, the center of attention without even being present.

Perhaps it was the rarity of the company, or the champagne, or just his petty nature, but *damn* it felt good to just laugh at him.

The lazy Susan moved a quarter turn and Frederick watched as Alana served herself a few thin slices of honey baked ham. Her smile twitched, as if she wasn't sure about keeping it up, before she let it go in Frederick's direction like an olive branch…or at least a twig. "I," she began gravely, "am going to put mustard on this."

Frederick pulled a dramatic gasp. "You wouldn't."

"I'm doing it."

"Blasphemy."

"God can't do anything about it. He's been unavoidably detained."

Frederick's jaw dropped so far he felt it pop. Will cupped hand across his eyes and muttered something beneath hearing. Alana, who was now following through on her threat with a small jar of Dijon, shot Will a rather satisfied smile. Whatever inside joke or reference was happening between them, Frederick wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Margot raised her glass in his direction, a barely perceptible move that seemed to say '*Nice save'*.

Frederick dug into his dinner, suddenly ravenous. And, for perhaps the first time in his career, he listening to the speakers rattle off the awards and publications of others without feeling a speck of jealousy.

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"Are you sure you're okay with...this?" Will lifted his chin in the direction of the dance floor, which an hour ago had been covered in dinner tables. He watched, more than a little impressed, as Frederick glided his partner around the periphery with expert skill.

Alana shot him a sideways look. "I don't own Margot, Will. And it's not as if I can lead her around in a waltz. Not yet, anyway." As if to prove her point, she shifted her weight to the other leg for the second time in as many minutes. Her lips tightened in only the barest expression of strain.

"Besides," she continued, "we both know her tastes lean in one direction. Except in situations of need, of course."

Will closed his eyes and let up a few internal curses. "She told you."

"She told me."

"I thought she would, at some point."

Alana nodded, taking a sip of her water. "We don't have any secrets from each other, but before either of us digs a deeper hole with circumspect talk, know I'm not the jealous type or anything."

He turned to face her and she smirked, her eyes dancing in a way he hadn't seen in almost two years. She was teasing him.

"Lucky for me." He pretended to let out a relieved breath, which gave her a good laugh.

"If she's trying to make anyone jealous right now, it would be you."

Will frowned, confused since they had just established Margot's singular interests, when realization hit. The fact Alana was watching his face very carefully was just another hint for his too-many-whiskeys-already head.

"There's nothing like that happening."

"Oh? I know we all love dancing around the subject, but you *are* at a New Year's Eve party, wearing a tux, on Frederick's plus one invitation. Forgive me if I have some questions."

"Forgiven."

"*Will*."

His reflexive urge to keep his personal affairs to himself hardly mattered when he really had no answer. At least not one he could form intelligibly. "What's the question?"

"Why are you here with Frederick?"

"I didn't think he would do well on his own."

“You realize that answer just raises more questions.”

He took another drink, red wine this time. “Then ask the question you really want to ask.”

“Fine. Are you and Frederick *involved?* And let’s not pretend my tone doesn’t perfectly get my meaning across.”

Will sighed, barely holding back a scowl. “You shouldn’t read tabloids, Alana. They’ll rot your brain.”

“Oh, so you *did* see that? Freddie’s interesting little story with the interesting photo. Hannibal saw it too. He even tore it out to add to his collection of favorites.”

“As I’m sure Freddie knew he would. She’s trying to get an interview with him, you know.”

“Of course I know. It’s my signature denying the requests.” Alana turned away to set her glass down. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

Will raised his glass to his lips and watched over the rim as Frederick deftly spun Margot out of the path of another couple, his hips leading the way. Who knew he could dance? Where the hell did he learn to dance?

“My answer to ‘involved’ with the meaningful tone is no, I’m not.” He turned to her, all too conscious that he had to force himself to look away from Frederick and the fact that he was once again doing something to surprise Will.

Will, whose entire profession was about people *not* surprising him.

He could assuage Alana’s curiosity easily by just telling her about the medical files and the details of the Horseman case. Frederick was doing a favor for him and Jack, so he was doing a favor for Frederick, simple as that. End of friendly concerned interrogation. However, Frederick’s favor was technically illegal and a great risk to his medical license. He doubted Frederick would want Alana knowing about it. And he didn't want to imply he was there because Frederick had demanded quid pro quo on his favor.

Instead, he decided to be honest. Like a fool. “He’s not as bad as you think, Alana. He never really was.”

“He brainwashed Abel Gideon,” she countered, her voice low and hard. “Then he dared to imply it was *my fault* when Gideon escaped and killed those guards.”

“And he paid with a kidney and four feet of lower intestine.” Will took another sip of wine, but the taste had gone sour in his mouth. True, he had not seen Frederick in his worst—or second worst?—moment, but Freddie Lounds’ detailed description had done well to paint a picture. “As far as paying for one’s crimes, I’d say he’s running a surplus credit. Wouldn’t you?”

Alana’s shoulders lifted over a deep breath, but she let it out with a resigned purse of her lips. He had seen it before, the extraordinarily rare Alana Bloom *You may be right but I won’t admit it* sigh.

“Just be careful, Will. Please. I don’t want you to think you’ve found a friend only to turn around and see your mug-shot on the cover of a pop psychology paperback. All I’ve ever known of Frederick is his ambition.”

Will set the wine he no longer wanted on the table behind them. “He returned all my test results.”

“What?”

“The video and audio recordings, the personality tests, session notes. Everything. I burned it all in a file box.”

Alana’s jaw dropped, her eyes growing wide with a welling of shock and disbelief that, he was guilty to admit, he rather enjoyed. He could almost see the cracks forming in that shell of cynicism that had coated her since their lives went to Hell. He would give almost anything to tear down the hardness Hannibal had put on her, but at the same time he knew she needed it. She, after all, still entered the lion’s den almost every day.

"Okay," she said, nodding. "Another question, then?"

"Might as well."

She stepped closer, eyes flickering over his chest, and said in a much lower voice, "Did you break any windows to get that tux, or do you have his key?"

Fuck. He regretted losing the wine glass. "Key."

The music faded, sliding from a big band waltz into something more modern. Before Alana could continue—and there would be a continuance—Frederick and Margot returned, both flushed with dancing and alcohol.

“Did you know,” Margot started, hooking her arm through Alana’s, “that Dr. Chilton has a secret life as a underground salsa instructor.”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Frederick huffed, despite his smile. "I do not."

"There's no point in denial. Secret's out," Margot teased as she took up her glass from the table.

"I don't think I've ever seen you dance before." Alana tilted her head curiously. "Even though we've both attended the same parties in the past. You always stuck to conversation."

Frederick's smile faltered. "I'm usually more interested in catching up with colleagues." And he usually came alone, and wouldn't risk the embarrassment of someone rejecting his offer to dance. Will couldn't know that for certain, but he trusted the guess. Margot, after all, had been the one to grab Frederick's arm and drag him to the dance floor.

Muffled music sounded, and Will recognized the chipper Mozart ring tone of Frederick's Worst Patient. Frederick pulled his phone from his jacket with some surprise.

"Hello?"

"...see your ear, Doc!...phone down!"

Frederick huffed and held the phone out in front of him. "I hate this video call stuff. Is everything alright? It's almost midnight."

"Nothing's wrong. Happy New Year!" The declaration came in a series of voices, as well as the muffled sounds of the phone of being jumbled like there was more than one person on the phone. *"Yo, check this out! We made our own Times Square ball to drop! Keish put glitter on an old soccer ball."*

Frederick rolled his eyes. "Hello again, Simon. It sou—Ah, I see. Very festive."

"I see jelly fish behind you, where are you?"

Frederick made a face, the same look of endeared frustration he had held the last time he spoke to this patient. He mouthed a quick 'excuse me' to over the phone and headed off toward the quiet of the corridor leading to the exhibits.

"That sounded like a bunch of kids," Alana said. "I thought he didn't have any family."

Will only shrugged. His attention had been drawn elsewhere. A man on the other side of the dance floor stood in conversation with a few others, the sort of animated yet hushed back-and-forth that attended gossip. But the man broke away to shamelessly stare, or glare, at Frederick's back as he passed. Frederick, still holding his phone in front of him, didn't seem to notice. He looked about Frederick's age, maybe a bit older, with an artificial tan and light brown hair that even Frederick would call over-styled.

The man made some declaration to his companions, who shook their heads at him. The conversation continued for another minute or so, with him saying something firm in a continuously louder voice, while his companions frowned and began to look around nervously. He raised a pointed finger, speaking, and Will only caught something like *hospital board* and *ridiculous*. He handed off his glass to the woman next to him and spun off in the same direction Frederick had taken.

"Will?" Alana must have said something else he didn't hear.

"I'll be right back."

The dancing had started again, so he was forced to skirt around the edge of the room toward the exit to the main concourse. Other guests had made their way throughout the aquarium, drinking and talking quietly before the various tanks. He came to the end of the main concourse where escalators, silent at the late hour, gave options to the left and right. A tightly pitched '*Excuse me?'* sounded from somewhere to the left, past a sign announcing Blacktip Reef.

Will approached the wall of the escalator until the railing was just below eye level, allowing him to peer over. Frederick stood before a massive tank of circling sharks, which was too

damn poetic. The few night running lights cast watery swirls and predator shadows on the floor, leaving most of the space uncomfortably dim. Still, he had no problem seeing Artificial Tan jab a finger at Frederick's chest.

"...know who you bribed or what, but you should have lost your license at the very least!"

Frederick's grip tightened around his phone, though he seemed to have ended the call, thankfully. "I *lost* plenty, not that it's any of your business. Now, if you'll excuse me—"

He stepped in Frederick's path. "You know your membership is hanging by a thread, right? I submitted a request to have you drummed out, and I'm not the only one. You may have found a way to dance around the hospital board, but don't—"

"So that's what this is still about, because the board hired me instead of you?" Frederick puffed himself up, which did little to counter the way the other man was using his superior height to hang over him. "It's been five years, Charles. Bitterness has a particular hue, and it doesn't match your complexion. I'd leave it off, if I were you."

"Don't give me any of your snippy queer bullshit!" He shoved a hand into a Frederick's shoulder, causing him to stumble back a step.

Will's fist tightened at his side, but along with it came an eerily familiar calm.

Frederick backed up, his cocky expression wavering under genuine alarm now. "What did you say to me?"

"Why don't you just resign? Rumor is you won't even do you job up there, that you had to bring in Bloom because you couldn't handle it. You don't belong in this field and you never did. In fact, if I were you—"

"If I were you, I would stop talking and leave. Right now."

Both men snapped their heads in Will's direction. He came fully around the angled wall of the escalator, slipping a lazy hand into his trouser pocket. He moved slowly, head tilted just a bit and his expression studiously focused yet blank.

Years of slipping under the skin of monsters had made the facade second nature. He knew it like his own reflection.

Charles, whoever he was, plastered on an ugly smile. His cheeks were flushed, and the slight sway of his head and shoulders suggested he'd had plenty to drink. "Just having a private conversation with my colleague. Which *patients* aren't privy to." He returned his glare to Frederick. "Dating them now, Chilton? Another *gross* ethics violation for the books."

Frederick sputtered in renewed outrage, but Will cut him off. "He's not my doctor. I'm no one's patient." He took another few slow steps in this Charles' direction, never letting his eyes waver from him. "Not anymore."

He laid just enough creepy emphasis on the last word to fill it with suggestions, and sure enough Charles' eyes widened and his lips paled. Of course he knew who Will was, and knew

who Will's last psychiatrist had been. There wouldn't be a soul there who didn't.

Will cocked his head further. "You look familiar? Have I seen you before?" He hadn't.

"I, eh...I don't think so." He took a step back, shooting a glance at Frederick that seemed almost pleading, and wasn't that a sharp turnaround.

"Are you sure?" Will pressed, advancing. "I feel like I might have seen you at a dinner party somewhere. Unfortunately I wasn't able to stay for the meal, just came to drop off some wine. But I did get a look at the guests before I left."

It was all spoken and unspoken. This man was a doctor in Baltimore, a member of the medical association, just the type who might have found himself on the receiving end of a crisp ivory invitation written in beautiful copperplate hand. Will raised his brow in question and, ever so slightly, sucked in his lower lip.

"No!" He snarled, looking Will up and down as he backed away. "I was never at any goddamn dinner parties! I never went!" He cast Frederick one more vicious look before he scrambled off, his hurried gate warbling as he made to get around the corner and out of their sight.

"Will?"

Shit. As satisfying as that had been—he hated bullies—he hadn't considered how Frederick might react to his psychopath floor show. In fact, he hadn't considered how *he* would react. He forced the mask away with a shudder, like peeling a wet towel from his shoulders. He had never been good at staying on the surface, not went sinking felt so easy.

"Relax, Frederick," he said, breathing deep. "I can play crazy when I have to."

Frederick's wary expression dropped like a stone. "Are you *kidding* me!"

Will laughed, especially when Frederick placed a hand over his heart and drew a few theatrically deep breaths. "Think of it as method acting for forensic profilers."

"You are *not* funny, Will."

"I wasn't going for funny." He looked behind him. "I think it worked fine."

"Yes, *it* worked splendidly. By the end of the night, word of mouth will have you a serial killer again, and me the incompetent psychiatrist who can't tell he dating a psychopath." Frederick snapped out the words in agitation as he shoved his phone back in his coat. He seemed to have missed the last thing he said, until he didn't.

"I mean, eh...not that anyone would really think that." Frederick scoffed, forcing a laugh. "If he tries to spread that around, he'll be the one everyone starts calling unstable."

That odd warmth settled over Will again, this time somewhere in the pit of his stomach, and Frederick's flustered concern over Will's reaction only seemed to intensify it.

"I'm not worried about that."

"Oh. Good." Frederick looked toward the tank, cringing as one of the sharks grazed its side along the glass. "I've consulted with the FBI before, after all. And everyone knows you work for the FBI, so any sensible person would see that we're just, eh…" He made a motion with his hand.

"That we're just Profiler Pals?"

Frederick's expression went tragic, for lack of any better description. It lasted until Will smirked, then morphed into his usual flustered outrage.

"Alana! Damn her, I should have known."

"Alana didn't tell me anything. I saw it today at the drug store." He could mention the photo and its easy to interpret, or misinterpret, content, but that would take gentle teasing into cruelty.

Although, why would it be cruel? Why was Frederick so damn worried about a picture and an empty story? It had to be more than his loneliness and concern that Will might leave the house. He had thought about the issue earlier that evening, and now his thoughts went back to the same conclusion he had drawn before; Frederick wasn't acting like someone who had been misrepresented, he was acting like someone who had been caught.

Caught. In that moment, when the photograph was taken. With that look on his face, looking at Will like he...like someone who...

Oh.

The warmth turned to an uncomfortable heat crawling over his scalp and making his collar feel tight. Other than that, he felt...He didn't know how he felt. He wasn't angry, or irritated, or pleased. At least he didn't think he was, but it wouldn't be the first time his sense of self locked up like a rusty boat engine, leaving him adrift.

Frederick had pulled out his phone again and was, mostly likely, pretending to scroll through something. He studiously avoided eye contact. Will would have chalked it up to embarrassment about everything the Charles asshole had said, but current revelations left him wondering all sorts of different things.

"I think I'm going to look around for a bit." Frederick motioned to the tanks. "I not ready to go back to all the noise."

At that moment, raised voices echoed down the main concourse, shouts of Happy New Year and the pitched strains of *Auld Lang Syne.* Frederick looked down at his phone.

"Ah. Midnight. Happy New Year." He looked at the corridor behind him, dim but for the night lights of the tanks, then back to the concourse. If there had been a hole in the ground, he might well have leapt into it. "I suppose we should head back, then. I don't think the aquarium is going to let us run this much longer."

Will only nodded, still adrift, and they headed back.

The song was still playing, and a projected screen in the corner showed the crowds in Times Square. Alana and Margot had fresh champagne glasses, sipping before they kissed against broad smiles.

"Happy New Year," Frederick smiled as they approached, snatching two glasses from a passing waiter. He looked to Will, then the glass. "Oh, did you want one or..."

Will took the glass. "Thanks."

Tipsy declarations of Happy New Year continued, along with the annual barrage of kissing couples and bad sway dancing—the only style that worked with *Auld Lang Syne.* Frederick seemed hyper focused on his glass, staring into the bubbles between too frequent sips. His ears had gone pink again, though probably not from alcohol.

“Mrs. Verger, Doctor Bloom! For the paper?” A bouncing young guy with a press badge around his neck stopped before them and held up a weighty camera.

Alana gave a somewhat embarrassed smile, while Margot pivoted to just the right angle and lifted her chin, like the old hand socialite she was. Frederick moved away from Alana and out of the shot, but the movement caught the journalist’s eye. He gawked.

“Whoa. Dr. Chilton? Mr. Graham! You want to step in, please? All together!” He motioned for the four of them to pack in, his eyes dancing like he had just won the lottery.

Frederick seemed more surprised than unwilling, but only moved when Alana motioned for him to step in.

"Smile, Frederick. You have name recognition." There was no snark in her tone, but Will doubted Frederick heard it that way.

"Not for reasons I would have liked," Frederick muttered before lifted his chin and forced a smile that wouldn't fool anyone. The journalist stepped back and made a motion for them to get closer to fit his frame. Will, like any lost boat, blamed what he did next on unaccountable waves. He rested his hand snugly against the small of Frederick's back, and watched as his eyes widened and his fake smile softened into the real thing.

"Okay, smile!"

And they did, four members of the most exclusive club in Baltimore.

Phew! If anyone wants to buy me a Ko-fi, it would be much appreciated! =)

Iris

Chapter Notes

How long has it been? Since July!? What the hell is wrong with me...
For this chapter, my apologies to real life nurses. Your jobs are beyond difficult and you're doing what you have to do. Frederick is just prissy and demanding. As always, no betas we die like fools....

September 23rd, 2019. Chapter 20 - (7,434 words)

He couldn't believe he was doing this. It was ridiculous

"I've read almost everything here…"

Cynical appeals to delusion were something he hadn't dabbled in since his residency days. The days of finger paints and sour milk, of institutionalized infants trapped in the bodies of adults.

"I'm not a psychic, Jack, whatever you might think!"

He had been glad when he moved on to abnormal psychology. No more nursing a smoking habit just to regularly escape the building, no more ducking into empty rooms to hide his welling eyes.

"There's something off with this one. Plastic. I see what he's doing but I don't feel *what should be behind it."*

Abnormal psychology was easier. Psychopaths were easier. You didn't have to worry too much about feeling compassion for someone with no appreciation of the mutual concept.

"They have nothing in common, Jack! Different MOs, different victim profiles. The only one left to talk to is Swenson, and I'll need an acid bath after I do."

Frederick felt his skin crawl, that old progression of goosebumps that started on his shoulders and spread like cold water. He had felt the same thing earlier that morning, when he had stopped short in the hallway at the sound of Will's angry voice. Even Jack's terse replies had managed to pierce the room, though it was mostly the unintelligible crackling one hears through a cellphone.

Will wouldn't get anything from talking to Philip Swenson. Out of all the victims' fathers, he was the greatest outlier in the group. He was the youngest, he was the only one so far whose motivation was inarguably sexual—making the entire group statistically odd, quite frankly—and he had never put forth any kind of competency defense. The perfect example of ego

making an intelligent person stupid. The only thing Will would get for his trouble would be mileage on his car and a nice inside view of the death row lockup at Green Correctional.

But not if Frederick could help it.

For the twentieth time in two days his mind went to the image of Will standing in front of a tank full of sharks, his white shirt and blue eyes practically glowing against the black void of expensive wool. He hadn't belonged there. He hadn't been comfortable there. He had gone anyway, just to make Frederick's night easier.

He could do this.

He snatched up the items he had come for—an online search had directed him to the store—and felt like the greatest sore thumb in history as he made his way through aisles of scrapbook paper and artificial flowers to reach the checkout line. The cashier, a cheerful gray haired woman who would be enjoying retirement in a less vicious world, gave him a brief but amused smile. It wasn't every day a bespoke three-piece suit came through her line with an arm full of art supplies.

"Autistic?"

Frederick snapped his head up from his open wallet. "I'm sorry?"

"Your kid. Autistic?" She indicated the box of chunky crayons. "My grandson is, and he used to have a thing about eating stuff he shouldn't. Something about the texture, what do they call that...?"

"Pica."

"Right. Anyway, these crayons are edible."

"Yes. The paper too, right?" He had to make sure.

"Yeah, it's made from rice, I think. They use it for screen printing pictures onto cakes, so your kid will be just fine if it comes to that."

My 'kid' is in his fifties and murdered twenty-two people so he could eat their eyeballs.

"Thanks." He nodded, paid, and fled like a fish flopping its way back to water. The whole endeavor would probably be a waste, but he would regret not trying. Once in his car, he stuffed the shopping bag into his valise and broke several speed limits back to the hospital.

*****

"Still responsive?"

An orderly Frederick didn't know by name opened the last security door with a mute nod. Denise was waiting on the other side. She was relatively new to the staff, part of the recent hires he had made for Hannibal's arrival. A registered nurse with prison experience, she had tested well in all the areas of concern. She showed low susceptibility to flattery and emotional manipulation, had little to no personal interest in criminal profiling, and redundant questioning methods had confirmed a high ethical foundation separate from empathy. Plus, Frederick had a sneaking suspicion she just flat out didn't like rich white assholes.

He had hired her on the spot.

"Aren't you on duty in the special ward?"

Denise gave a shrug. "Fridays are my break from his royal highness. Reed is still talking, mostly to himself." She extended a metal clipboard, Reed's file. "Dr. Jiang said he made some changes to his mediation recently. Upstairs called him, but he's in Boston."

Frederick tucked his valise under one arm to flip through the file, though he already knew the contents. Ever since the hospital had been forced to confiscate all paper and writing materials from him for his own safety, Lucas Reed had spent the majority of his time in a swimming psychosis two steps above catatonia. On his good days he might acknowledge the existence of the staff by following them with his eyes. On his great days, he banged the cell wall and demanded they look at him. Not talk, not let him out, just look. *Look at me! Look at me!*

According to the staff reports today was a great day, and Frederick had every intention of taking advantage of it. Reed might know something, anything that could shine light on how the Horseman was choosing his victims. Either the victims, their fathers, or both had something in common, and figuring out what that was would give Will the break he needed. And save the potential victims, of course. Find the victims first, get them under police protection, stop the killings. That was all that mattered. He would be doing the same thing for Jack Crawford or anyone. Obviously.

"Keep this corridor clear." Frederick headed down, his shoes clicking on the stone floor despite his rare effort to lessen the effect. A folding chair had been set out for him and he placed his valise to the side of it.

Reed, short and thin with chestnut hair that, despite being in his fifties, was still unaccountably free of gray, stood bent over the tiny sink in his cell. The water was not running. He held his face close to the metal faucet, staring at the warped reflection of his own eye in the poorly polished chrome. The mirror had been taken out years ago.

Frederick sat and pulled the crinkled shopping bag from his valise. This ridiculous maneuver would either work or the staff would have something else to gossip about. Either way, he had come this far. He opened the sheaf of paper and set it across the metal clipboard in his lap. Next, the odd crayons that smelled like stale cake for some reason. He began to draw.

"Look at me!"

Frederick jolted, almost dropping the clipboard. He hadn't noticed Reed's swift movement across the cell. He pressed both hands to the glass, his nose almost touching as he hunched

down to bring himself to Frederick's eye level.

"Look at me! Look, look!"

Frederick looked. Reed sucked in a shaky breath and stared, stared so hard that it was like he was trying to project himself through the glass and across the seven feet separating them. Frederick swallowed and forced himself to keep his face up, only darting his eyes down every few seconds to keep track of his drawing. Eye contact was a favorite among his patients, something he had gotten used to inside the hospital walls years ago, but Reed didn't stare at people the way most of his fellow inmates did. It wasn't the cold stare of a scientist watching an amoeba, nor was it the old dead-eyed intimidation tactic associated with psychopaths.

No, Reed's stare was much worse.

Years ago, on one of his indulgent trips to Italy, Frederick had stood among the usual throngs of tourists outside the public gardens of a monastery, curious to see what they were all waiting for. An albino peacock had been strutting about the lawn, his tail tucked up in a firm line behind him. Frederick remembered the way everyone had watched, almost unblinking, their bodies and heads swaying slightly to keep the bird firmly in sight. Many had even forgotten to raise their phones and cameras, the true indication of tourist awe. Then the peacock had stopped, just where he knew he had the best position, and shook out the magnificent fan of his white tail with a shudder that didn't just run through the bird. It had run through the crowd; the sound of a hundred people sucking in their breath at once, with a few unconscious *Ohs* to harmonize. Peacocks don't have facial expressions, but he was certain that bird had been pretty damned pleased with himself.

He had never forgotten it.

Reed watched him now the same way the tourists had watched that bird; rapture, adoration, the anticipation of beauty. The hungry seed of wished possession.

"Dark, too dark! Closer!" Reed's yell came out like a stage whisper, but no less jolting. Frederick cradled the items in his lap and rose to scoot his chair a few feet closer. The blue-white light from the cell fell on him and Reed moaned.

Frederick's empty stomach twisted. He really should have eaten something. He continued to draw.

"Green…" Reed sighed, dragging his hand down the glass. "Fern or moss—no! Too bright, moss, no. Fern. Rare, *so* rare."

Lucas Reed was, unlike the majority of the other hospital inmates, truly and utterly insane. He was not a psychopath, though Frederick kept that opinion firmly to himself and away from the vehement disagreement of his colleagues and Reed's lawyers. He had never shown any penchant for manipulation or superficial charm, either before or after his capture. His murders had been conducted in open areas, bodies left where they were killed, with no discernible attempt to hide the crime or his guilt. The only thing that had allowed Reed to go on for so long was the class of his victims—truck drivers and prostitutes, both targeted

simply because they happened to be in the late night truck depots where Reed stopped—and the gross incompetence and apathy of the police. His last victim had been a trust fund frat-boy, slumming it in a cross-country drive when he had made the mistake of buying snacks at the wrong place in West Virginia.

The compartmentalization, the wall that had allowed Reed to appear perfectly normal most of his life, to hold down a job and buy groceries without eating the store clerk's eyes, had crumbled to dust after his capture. All that was left was his fanatical obsession with the human eye. Reed was a genuinely sick man who had once been much healthier. Frederick swallowed again, and tore his drawing from the pad.

"I'm not a very good artist." He kept his voice light, conversational. "But I haven't studied the source material nearly as much as you have. What do you think?" He held up the drawing.

Reed blinked, his gaze shifting quickly between Frederick and the rather pathetic drawing of an eye. The almond shape of the lid made it look like an Egyptian hieroglyphic.

Reed snarled. "That's not right! Not one color, never just one…color…"

Frederick turned the drawing around as if to inspect it. "You're right. No one has a solid blue iris like this. It would have gray in it too. Maybe a bit of green?"

The drawings they had confiscated from Reed's cell, the ones he hadn't yet eaten, were akin to gallery masterpieces. One of them still hung in Dr. Jiang's office.

"Gray, yes, gray…."

Frederick started shading in points of gray over the blue, doing his best to blend as Reed huffed and fidgeted, twisting himself every which way to see the progress. The exercise went on for a while as Frederick followed Reed's barked directions, switching colors and using the side of his finger to blur edges. Reed was getting frustrated with his lack of skill.

"I think you would do a better job of this than me."

"Yes, yes, give it here!" He scrambled over to the little hatch where his meals were passed.

"Does artistic talent run in your family?"

Reed scrunched up his face like he smelled something bad. "Runs, runs, *stupid.*" He scratched at the back of his neck vigorously. "Nothing *runs*. We're born with nothing, born *blank!*"

Ay Dios, a philosopher.

"So your son didn't inherit your artistic talent. Did you ever teach him?" Frederick pulled out the black crayon and began thickening the line under the eye.

"No, you're ruinin' it!" Reed pounded the glass and Frederick lifted a staying hand in the direction of the approaching orderlies. They backed off.

If he gave Reed the paper and crayons now the interview would be over. He would slip into his detached world, recreating the object of his obsession. Frederick rose, setting the clipboard and crayons on the chair behind him, and approached the glass with the single loose picture. They still had no idea what fixation pushed the Horsemen to choose one serial killer's child over another. Was it about the fathers only, and their children were just paying the price? Or did it have something to do with both?

"Did your son ever draw eyes, like you? Did you show him how?"

Reed frowned again, this time shaking his head as if Frederick was talking gibberish. "Stupid, *stupid!* Give that here!"

Damn it, he hated making direct bribes. It felt so amateurish. "Mr. Reed, I will give you this picture, and the paper and crayons, if you tell me about your son Benjamin. Just a few things. Did he like to draw? Was he into sports?" *Anything, just talk about him…*

Reed's expression absolutely crumbled. "No…NO! That's not fair! Can't tell from nothing, no, no, doesn't work that way…"

"What do you mean 'from nothing'?"

Reed was pacing now, alternating between scratching the back of his head and batting his palm against it. "Can't, can't…don't know we go around the Sun just 'cause you want to, no. Got to be told, got to learn it. Can't just *know from nothing,* it's not fair!"

Frederick's fingers tightened on the paper as his stomach sank. "Mr. R— Lucas. Lucas, did you know your son? Did you know Benjamin?"

"No!" Reed wailed as he squatted down, his gaze fixed on the chair and the art supplies. "Never saw him, never. Trish went away, didn't like me anymore. Ask something else! I'll tell you something else, something I *know.*"

"Your wife left when she was still pregnant." Frederick's hopes sank. He had been counting on getting something about their relationship as a possible avenue of inquiry. So much for that.

Reed's expression turned thoughtful, distant. "She could have stayed just fine, stayed awake forever. Her eyes…" He snapped his head up, meeting Frederick's gaze. "She had *ugly* eyes, like an old puddle. No, no, she could have stayed. Didn't need to make her sleep."

What a lovely sentiment. Frederick pulled down the transfer shoot and slipped the drawing through. Reed let up a truly hideous whoop of glee as he went for it, and yet Frederick couldn't help feel the strangest—and most unwelcome—sense of accomplishment as Reed practically hugged the subpar doodle. His patient looked…happy. Improved.

He removed the crayons from the box—it had a built in sharpener—and wrapped them up in a sheet of paper before setting them in the transfer shoot. Before including the pad of paper,

he stopped to divide it.

“Mr. Reed,” he began, “I’m giving you ten sheets of paper now. I’ll give y—You will be given another ten sheets every week. Do you understand?”

“Ten, ten!” He rushed to the transfer hatch and lifted out the items like they were made of glass. He went straight to the desk and stool bolted against the side wall.

Frederick cleared his throat, which had gone scratchy. “Understand that for your own safety we can’t allow you to keep too many drawings in your cell at any time.” Edible or not, he couldn’t allow Reed the chance of scarfing down a whole book’s worth of drawings in one sitting.

“Yes, yes. Ten!” Reed giggled as he set out a fresh piece of paper and began inspecting his new colors. His interest in Frederick was over.

Or so he thought. Reed came back to the glass, still holding Frederick’s bad drawing, and seemed to peer up into Frederick’s eyes despite them being almost the same height. He smiled, big and sincere.

“I’ll make a new one for you, you can have it. Better than that *fake*.” He jabbed his fingers against the glass, just level to Frederick’s left eye.

He took a step back, his pulse spiking. Of course Reed had spotted it. Career optometrists didn’t know eyes as well as this poor bastard. “That’s, eh, very generous of you.”

Reed placed his palm against the glass, again at eye level. He was practically vibrating. “Did you give it away? A-a gift?”

A twinge of pain, a pinprick memory, shot through his cheek and down the side of his neck. His throat tightened and his eyes watered against the urge to cough. “No.”

“Yeah. They never give them. Such a beautiful green…” he let out a long sigh and pressed his nose to the glass. “Lucky…it must have been *delicious.”*

Bile touched the back of Frederick’s throat, breaking his hold on the coughing fit. He spun around, snatching up his valise and the rest of the stupid rice paper.

“Dr. Jiang will be back in two days.” He coughed again, damn lingering cold! “I’m sure he will want to discuss your art privileges further—”

“He liked the eyes I made.”

“I would like you to draw one picture that isn’t an eye. Just one—“

“He doesn’t let me keep them. Keep them inside. He took my paper.”

“Do you think you can do that? Just one picture, anything at all.” He was rambling, fumbling the rice paper into his bag while keeping the clipboard under his arm. He needed to calm

down. He was a professional, *el amor de Dios.* As far as the worst patients in the hospital went, Reed didn't even make the top ten.

"Good day, Mr. Reed," he muttered, spinning away from the cell and the lone chair.

"Thank *yooouu*, thankyouthankyou…"

Frederick quickened his pace until all he could hear was the click of his shoes and the rush of blood in his ears.

*****

It was late by the time Frederick moped through the garage door and slid his keys onto the kitchen counter. Between his cold and the holidays, paperwork had gotten backed up and his assistant had finally reached the edge of her ability to be polite about it. The only thing keeping him from a full valise-dropping sulk was the staccato symphony of dog nails tapping around him.

"If this is your 'cook me eggs' dance, forget it."

"You only have yourself to blame," Will muttered from his place at the kitchen table, eyes fixed on an open file.

"A mantra I've become quite familiar with, thank you." He shifted his glare from Will to the dogs. "You want ice cream? At least I don't have to cook that."

Will made a sound that was suspiciously close to a laugh. Frederick chose to ignore it as he laid his coat over one of the bistro chairs and headed for the freezer. Just as he grabbed the handle, Mozart's french horn concerto sounded from his coat.

Frederick frowned at the clock over the stove. It was almost nine.

"Hold on..." he groused, fumbling through the folds over the chair. "Hello? It's pretty late, E—"

"Doc?! Doc, can you, eh...I need a ride. Please."

Frederick's heart gave a lurch before seeming to stop. Ellery's voice, always so preternaturally calm, wavered like a plucked string.

"What's wrong?" He demanded, already tossing his coat up as if he could get into it with one hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Try again."

"No. I saw that guy again, the one from the cemetery."

And Ellery wouldn't be calling him at this hour, in her subdued version of upset, if just seeing someone were the end of it. "What happened?"

"He, eh, he was mad at me." Fabric rustled through the speaker. *"Pissed off he got arrested, I guess, and he hit me. My head..."* She let out a heavy sigh, almost irritated. *"I think I might need stitches."*

"Where are you!?" Frederick switched hands on the phone in an attempt to shimmy into the other arm of his coat. He had no luck bouncing around until Will appeared at his side, holding the coat up for him to slide in. His brow was knitted and he mouthed a question.

Ellery ran off her whereabouts, a diner not far outside the campus grounds. She remained relatively calm until he told her to hang up and call the police.

"No! I'm right next to campus, and the stupid campus police will get involved, and if they think I can't even catch a bus on my own without becoming a problem—"

"This is serious, he attacked you. Are you still in the same place he attacked you?"

"No. He ran off, and I ran here."

Will was standing in front of him now, his expression demanding enough for Frederick to cup a hand over the phone. "My patient, the teenager I told you about with the stalker. Hey, still there? Okay, are you around people?"

"Yes, there are people inside the diner. I'm not calling the cops, Doc." At the sound of his miserable groan, she added, *"Okay, but after you get here. Are y—um,* can *you come here?"*

"What? Yes, of course! Just stay where you are, I shouldn't be more than twenty minutes. Alright? Alright, yes. Bye."

His hand shook as he ended the call. Whatever Ellery said, it *had* to be worse. Of course it was worse! The poor kid had made an career out of convincing adults she was fine. What if she was badly hurt? Some injuries, *a lot* of injuries, had delayed complications. A slight knock to the head could cause a latent aneurysm days, even weeks later. Fractured ribs could break and pierce a lung, and if you couldn't get to a phone and call for help—

Fuck! "I have to go." He headed for the garage door, but Will blocked his path. Their eyes locked and Frederick's whirlwind thoughts took a break to wonder at why Will's complexion had gone flushed. There was something else in his face too, determination and concern...and a total lack of reticence from a man famous for avoiding eye contact.

"Do you need me to come with you?"

Frederick pursed his lips and fumbled with his gloves, anything to hold back the *yes* on his tongue and the smile pushing at his lips. He might have once had a very low opinion of Will's stability, but he was someone to trust in an emergency. He ran in, he saved people, often at great cost to himself.

Frederick swallowed and leaned back, only just realizing he had been leaning forward. "No, I think it best if just I show up. She doesn't know you, and I'm already overstepping medical boundaries as it is. And, eh, it will probably take a while. She said she might need stitches."

Will nodded, shifting his eyes away and suddenly looking much like he had that first day in Frederick's office. Cagey, unsure.

"But, could I call you if there's any trouble dealing with the police?" He pulled out his keys and jingled through them, as if he actually had to search for his car key on a ring with only two others. "I know you aren't a cop anymore, but maybe—"

"Sure. Yes."

"Okay." He wavered, glimpsing at the blue eyes in front of him and wishing he could just… that they could just… *You need to stop this.* "Give them ice cream, will you?"

Will snorted, an honest to God grin spreading his lips. "You're going to ruin them, you know."

"They're covered in hair and drool on everything. What's to ruin?" The desperate arrival of Maggie and Mocha at the back of his legs gave the cover he needed to slip through the garage door and ignore his own stupidity.

Will was just doing his job, or the duty someone like him still felt to be his job. Duty. Much like penance, or the guilt that would have someone attending a New Year's Eve bash for someone they had wronged but didn't even like.

That was all.

A phantom warmth spread over the small of his back, just where Will had placed his hand for that picture—*Don't be an idiot.*

He slumped into the car, gritting his teeth at himself for a few seconds before he pulled out of the driveway and broke speed limits in the direction of downtown. He spent the next twenty minutes with his thoughts shifting between a sensible outline of what he might have to do and who he might have to call, and an unrealistic fantasy of beating a child-stalking piece of shit into traction with his old cane.

The diner was one of those cheesy 50s throwbacks, all polished chrome and red vinyl booths, with a surprisingly full parking. He turned into the first spot he could, eyes already on the bright open windows and the well lit people within.

He pulled out his phone as he jogged toward the entrance.

"Doc."

Ellery appeared from where she must have been in the dark at the side of the building. She held her book bag in one hand, the top crunched in her fist and the broken strap dangling to the ground. With her other, she held the balled up end of her scarf against the side of her head. There was blood on her cheek.

”Oh my God." The surge of anger he had entertained in the car smothered under fear as he stopped in front of her, hands hovering in an inappropriate urge to hug her. "*Ay Dios,* let me see."

She pursed his lips, embarrassed. "It's not that bad. I bet it won't even need stitches."

"Ellery."

She pulled the scarf away slowly, wincing as her hair pulled against blood that was already starting to dry. It was too dark to get a proper look, but when she lowered the scarf further a few strands of hair caught and pulled, and he swore he saw her scalp lift away just a bit in a small crescent shape cut. The area was startling free of hair. She hissed and pressed the scarf back in place.

"We're going to the emergency room, now." He reached for her bag, scooping it up with the broken strap. "And we're going to call the police from there."

She made a face he chose to ignore as he bustled her back to the car. The ER at John Hopkin's was less than a mile away, and he had connections there. Or he had, once upon a time.

He fought the urge to demand what had happened through the short drive. Pulling into a visiting doctor spot—damn the ethics—he ushered Ellery through the modern glass-wall doors and into the almost painfully bright reception area. A nurse behind the desk took one look and stood up, a clipboard and paperwork already at hand.

"Hi," Ellery said, ramping up her signature deadpan. The blood had soaked well through her light gray scarf and into her shirt collar.

"She was attacked on the street. She has a crescent laceration about halfway back from the temple," he launched in, pulling his gloves off as Ellery once again lowered her scarf. "She was hit in the head, so I want a CT scan to make sure there's no—"

"I wasn't hit. Well, not in the head. He punched me in the side."

"What? Can you breathe? Do you feel sharp pains when you inhale?"

"No, I think he was just trying to knock the wind of me." She made that disgruntled look again. "It worked."

Frederick sputtered. "If he didn't hit you in the head, how did—"

"Excuse me."

"He pulled my hair, Doc.” Ellery made a gesture, outraged. “Yanked it really hard, I think a lock of it came out."

"Excuse me."

"Good God." He pressed a hand over his eyes, a vision of the cane beating fantasy flashing before him again. "I still want a chest x-ray. Just because you don't feel it now doesn't mean —"

"Sir! Excuse me, but we'll get her all checked. I just need you to have a seat and fill this out." She slid the clipboard toward him.

Frederick balked. "She is bleeding from the head and you want her to sit over here and scribble paperwork?"

The nurse, who probably had the same conversation twenty times a day, looked unimpressed. "Sir, there's important information we need before we can—"

"Yes, I know, like whether or not she has insurance. *So* important." He sneered, snatching up the clipboard. "Who is on call tonight?"

"Sir, her injuries are not life threatening. If you could just have a seat—"

"There's barely anyone in here!" He made a motion to the nearly vacant waiting room. "I'll fill this out *while* she's seen. Now."

The nurse narrowed her eyes, and for a moment he thought he was going to get an argument. Then her increased scrutiny hit pay dirt, and her eyes shot wide. She leaned away from the counter. "You're Frederick Chilton."

"Oh, for God's sake..."

"Hey, he's not a serial killer," Ellery said helpfully. "They dropped all those charges."

"Okay, alright." He raised his hands in a stopping motion. "I want to see the doctor on call, and tell him Dr. Chilton is seeing a patient in. Thank you."

Taking Ellery by the arm, he guided her straight through the admission doors and toward one of the examination bays, all while the nurse huffed and objected behind him. Ellery made a sound like a wheeze.

"What? Does your chest hurt?"

The wheeze, it seemed, was a laugh she was barely holding back.

"This is not even close to funny. *None* of this is funny."

"Doc, you went full 'let me see your manager' back there. Good thing you don't have acrylic nails or a Kate-plus-either haircut."

Frederick threw up his hands. "I don't know what *any* of that means, and I don't care right now." He pointed to the examination table. "Up."

Things moved relatively quickly after that. Ellery was cleaned up and disappeared behind a drawn curtain to have her torso examined and answer the sort of questions for which no

patient wanted an audience. Her shirt and coat were ruined with an alarming amount of blood, forcing Frederick to remember head wounds were always like that. It didn't help the twisting in his stomach, nor the unwelcome image of her bleeding to death next to some dirty bus stop.

He occupied himself with the forms, only to realize he could put down almost nothing more than her name. He didn't have her address memorized, and being in the foster system meant her health coverage was most likely Medicare.

"Ellery, I'm going to get your wallet out of your bag for your address," he called through the curtain as he fumbled in the book bag she had left with him.

"It's on the back on my school ID," she called back.

He found the little wallet and the school ID, slid into the clear sleeve where a driver's license would go in just a few days—he had almost forgotten about that—and copied down the address. On the other side of the license holder was one of those generic 'emergency contact' cards that often came in wallets. It had been responsibly filled out with the contact information for the Morgans.

"I'm going to call Mrs. Morgan now." And try to explain why their foster child called her therapist instead of them.

"Great."

"I'm sure she'll want to be here with you before the police come and you give your statement."

Ellery made a derisive sound through the curtain. "Do you want to bet on it? I have five bucks."

He made a disapproving sound in lieu of a reply. In hindsight, it was good he didn't take the bet.

Mrs. Morgan answered the phone after no less than twelve rings with an incoherent "Whosis?" followed by various scoffs of frustration as he outlined what had happened. By the time she sounded awake enough to think—at nine o'clock on a Friday—she groused about 'that girl' staying on campus late all the time and expecting everyone to 'bend over backwards' to accommodate her 'college shit.'

Clenching his phone until the case creaked, he said through his teeth, "How long before you're here? So I can tell the police if they get here before you."

Another hard scoff. "You drove here there, right? Just bring her home when it's all finished up. She has a key. I have other kids here to look after, I can't just run out in the middle of the night."

The other kids she was so busy looking after while asleep. Frederick drew a deep breath through his nose. "That's fine. I'm sure I can take care of everything."

"Yeah, thanks. Hey, just make sure she comes home with a copy of the reports or whatever. I'm gonna have to call the friggin' case worker tomorrow now and she'll want to see them. Like I don't already have enough to do."

He heard a man in the background snap about noise and trying to sleep. Frederick wanted to snap several things too. Mrs. Morgan hung up with a cursory goodbye, not making a single inquiry about Ellery or her condition beyond getting confirmation she could walk and wasn't dying.

These were the people who had been charged with being Ellery's parents, with giving her a *home*. The staff at a hotel would show less apathy.

He called the police.

Just like the nurse, they recognized him after a few seconds, which led to another awkward dance of dismissing the issue. Ellery told them what happened while Frederick twisted the broken strap on her bag.

"I was almost to the bus stop, the number eighty-six off campus, and he came onto the sidewalk over the wall, where those planters are. He grabbed me by my bag strap and pushed me against the wall, like he was trying to shove me over it. It was too high and it just hit me in the lower back, so I screamed. That's when he hit me in the side." Her fingers twitched, uncurling the lip of the paper cup she held.

The officer nodded. "And during this, did he say anything to you?"

"Yeah. Um..." She glanced at Frederick, though not as if she needed help. It was that embarrassed look again. She explained about getting her attacker arrested on Christmas Eve at the cemetery, and him making sure she knew that was the reason he was angry. Frederick winced when she repeated his words.

"He said, 'You got me locked up for a week, you little bitch. You're lucky I don't just break your neck.' That's when he pulled my hair out." She motioned to the bandage now taped over her two stitches, where a dime sized chunk of hair and surface skin had indeed been yanked clean out. The force had been enough to lacerate her scalp, thus the stitches.

Frederick, somewhere beneath his anger and worry, couldn't help but think what an odd thing it was. A small lock of hair, small enough to pull free but big enough to hurt and damage. If the attacker had fisted his whole hand into her hair, as one would expect in a struggle, it would have been too much to tear away, not enough force on a concentrated area.

It was almost as if getting the hair off and causing the wound had been the whole point.

One of the officers flipped up her book to a new page. “You’re sure it was the same man who was arrested at the cemetery?”

Ellery nodded. With formalities and contact information taken care of, the police were done and assured them it should be easy bringing the guy in. With his prior arrest as an ID, they could get a warrant issued that night most likely.

There was some fuss from the staff about needing a sign-off from a legal guardian, which led to a sharp exchange and some mutual derision of the Maryland state foster system—the nurse wasn't a fan either. Frederick carried Ellery's bag as they left the emergency bay, while she carried the documents her caseworker would need, along with a clear plastic bag containing her ruined coat. The sight of the bag and the blood stained fabric pressed against the inside made Frederick want to rage.

It wasn't just the pain or the fear of being attacked, of having your very life threatened; it was all the infected moments afterward. A ruined coat meant replacing it, which meant going to a store, shopping, paying, and at every step of the process remembering why it was all happening.

The drive to the Morgans' house was quiet. Ellery stared out the window as she cradled her broken bag and ruined coat—the hospital should have thrown it out—in her lap. If the shock of what had happened was finally hitting her, she would be in for a bad night, and Frederick could think of nothing to say short of the same empty platitudes adults were always giving children. *'It will be fine…don't worry…could have been worse*—Christ, he would cut out his tongue before he ever said the last one. He knew better.

The house was dark, save for one upstairs window. He thought he saw the shape of two faces, before one abruptly left the square of light.

"Keisha and Simon are home," Ellery said.

"Good. You should be with your friends," Frederick offered, glad to finally have something useful to say. "They will probably bombard you with questions, but—"

"I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't know who else to call." She said, gripping the plastic bag with a tremor she was doing well to keep out of her voice, but only just. "I missed the last bus and I didn't have enough money for a taxi. I promise I won't do this again."

Frederick's heart broke.

"You didn't *do* anything and you have nothing to apologize for." As sincere as he was, he realized too late how rote the statement sounded. Ellery nodded, muttering something like *Yeah, I know* and opened the door.

No, this wasn't going to do at all. Just as Ellery stepped out and turned around to say goodbye, he leaned across the center console.

"Ellery, listen to me. You are *not* a burden. You are not some problem that has been left uninvited on other people to deal with. I don't care how many put-upon sighs Mrs. Morgan throws at you or how much paperwork your caseworker has to do. If the adults in your life can't do the bare minimum without throwing passive-aggressive tantrums, that's *their* problem, not yours. Now…" He straightened up, drawing back into his seat. "I will see you Monday for this driver's test. One o'clock, right?"

Ellery stared for a few seconds until her blank expression morphed into a smile, though she seemed to be biting the inside of her cheek in an attempt to hide it. "Yep, ten. 'Night, Doc."

“Goodnight. And spend some time with Keisha, talk to her. Don’t just bottle yourself up over schoolwork.”

It was dark and she had stepped away from the car, but he just knew she was rolling her eyes. “But I already have a therapist.”

“Ha-ha, yes. It’s not the same and you know it. Now get inside and lock the door so I can leave.”

He swore he heard a snort of laughter, or maybe just a scoff, as she went through the rusty gate and up the porch steps. Along the way, she tossed the bag with her ruined coat into the garbage bin.

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The kitchen was dark, save the one light over the stove and flickering from the TV in the den. Frederick set his keys down quietly and cringed when his empty stomach chose that same moment to make an audible protest. It wasn’t helped by the fading scent of garlic still permeating the kitchen. Will must have cooked.

He entered the den to turn off the TV Will had obviously left on, only to halt at the sight before him. Will sat, or rather reclined, on the couch, his legs sprawled out on the ottoman and a pillow tucked behind his sleeping head. A dirty plate and half empty glass sat on the tray next to his legs, along with a series of files and two very unconscious dogs. Another open file lay forgotten in his lap.

“It’s here! It got Clemens!”

Frederick turned to the TV and almost laughed. There was Ellen Ripley, head shaved and doing her best to get a prison full of idiots to listen to her.

“The third one, Will? Really?” Frederick whispered, not wanting to wake him. He probably should wake him, just a little nudge on the shoulder. A gentle shake and a reminder he would be more comfortable in bed.

No, bad idea. It would be too… Just a bad idea.

Instead, he went back to the kitchen to find something to eat. And if he let his heels click a little louder than normal on the marble floor, all the better to get Will awake and upstairs *without* any direct suggestion from him. Without any embarrassing exchanges along the lines of ‘*You’re not my doctor, Frederick,’* or ‘*Gee, thanks, mom.’*

He opened the fridge, ready to settle for hummus and flatbread, to see a foil covered plate on the middle shelf. A yellow post-it note clung to the edge.

No meat or dairy

—W

Frederick wasn't sure how long he stood there, staring into the open fridge and shivering like an idiot. Too long. It was just food. He had made food for Will, after all, several times now.

Yes, because you want him to like being here. Because you want him to stay. Because you want him to like y—

It's. Just. Food. He tore the foil off the plate and barely looked at the vegetable and rice concoction before putting it in the microwave. It probably wouldn't even be good. Ha! What would Will know about making vegan fare? Will 'the fisherman' Graham, who probably never met a piece of food he didn't pan fry in butter.

The microwave dinged and he took the plate to the breakfast bar. He sat himself on one of the awful bistro chair and spooned up some rice and broccoli. At least it would sate his hunger and let him to get to sleep. By God, he was going to sleep in till noon tomorrow—

Garlic and green onions burst on his tongue, along with…What was that? The sauce was sweet and savory in the oddest way. It was almost like—maple syrup? And sesame oil? He took another bite, and another, feeling the day's tension bleed away as he savored the unexpected comfort food.

He was disappointed when he spooned up the last morsels in record time.

Making as little noise as possible, he placed his dishes in the washer before peering around the corner to see everyone in the den was still fast asleep. Then, firmly ignoring that sneering voice in his head telling him he was a fool and possibly a masochist, he went to the kitchen table and picked up the little post-it note pad Will had been using. He scribbled out a quick line and stuck the note to the screen edge of his ancient laptop.

Thank you

—F

Breakthrough

Chapter Notes

And we're back...finally. If I didn't make my living sewing like an inmate in a Dickensian workhouse (only a slight exaggeration), I might actually have time to write as much as I would like. C'est la vie.
To catch up, we left with Ellery getting attacked on the street and Frederick rushing off to take her to ER, as well as the creepy interview between Frederick and one eye-obsessed patient. Oh, and Will can cook vegan meals when he has the motivation to do so ;)

Chapter 21: 6,439 words.

The *Baltimore Sun* had waited three days to publish the article. It wasn't surprising. The average reader didn't give a damn what the over-paid denizens of the medical community did to entertain themselves, but reporters stuck on the society desk knew how to schmooze as good as those they flattered in print. This one would probably get an invitation to the next banquet.

Alana had known it was coming. Moments after that damned photographer had gleefully herded them together she had known it would make the paper. Luckily, the three day delay had given her time to realize a few things.

Namely, that she didn't care. As much as it stung to admit it, even if just to herself, Frederick had been right that day she confronted him in the hallway. Hannibal was going to play his games and poke at whomever he could *no matter what.* It didn't matter what was in the paper and what wasn't, what she managed to keep from him and what she couldn't. He would always find something or manufacture it himself.

Walking as slowly as she could without drawing attention, she unfolded the paper and took another look at the picture. They were all smiling, posing, but she had seen Frederick Chilton's public grin before. They all used it at times, that stretched out expanse of lips that didn't touch another muscle on the face, the one you had to pull out for the sake of etiquette and professionalism. But that wasn't the face looking up at her from the inky print. Frederick was honest-to-God *smiling.* He looked happy.

Hannibal was going to be livid.

Approaching the last security door, she refolded the paper and chewed the inside of her cheek to keep back her own smile. Maybe it was time to stop dreading this role she had saddled herself with and start enjoying it instead.

“Good morning,” She said, making the words almost chipper as she crossed the dim Persian carpet to her chair. “Or should I say Happy New Year?”

Hannibal was seated at his work table with a large sketch pad before him. He worked methodically, shading in an area of charcoal with the side of his finger. “Happy New Year. How is Margot?”

“Still basking in her freedom. Thank you again, by the way.”

His hand paused over the drawing and she smiled. He wasn’t expecting that, was he? She took a seat, wishing she had arranged coffee or something else to occupy her hands. Instead, she occupied her eyes with a thorough scan of the cell. A section of newspaper lay folded on his cot near the wall, and another few pages open on the table next to him.

“I hear you’ve been putting your poor lawyers through the wringer. Even had one in here on New Year’s day.” She pinched the crease on her trousers, rolling it between her fingers.

Hannibal tilted his head as he examined the sketch. “I have never been one for conducting my personal affaires through intermediaries. It’s less than ideal.”

Read between the lines, *I’m up to something and would have preferred to do it myself.*

“You don’t have personal affaires anymore, Hannibal. Your assets have been frozen.”

At that, Hannibal looked up. “In that case, I must be thankful my lawyers are such dutiful altruists. A rarity in their field.”

Again, unspoken but clear as crystal; his shark attorneys were certainly being paid by someone or with some means the FBI had not yet been able to track. A renewed spark of hatred swirled in her gut. He probably had millions hidden across three continents, and any number of lawyers and bankers. Not to mention the consummate groomer no doubt had at least one dazzled wretch out there doing his bidding. Dr. Du Maurier could blather on about drugs and confusion all she wanted, but Alana wasn’t buying it. Oh, certainly she had been manipulated, twisted, but not in any way ham-fisted enough to erase her culpability.

And the FBI had still not made any headway in identifying the mysterious Japanese woman Will had told them about. Interpol had raided the old estate in Lithuania and found it empty. No, Hannibal had agency in the world. There was no shortage of people willing to sell their very souls for the sake of fascination and idolatry.

“And speaking of your altruistic lawyers,” Alana began, “they’ve sent me another letter insisting on your right to speak to the hospital director.”

Hannibal had set his sketch pad aside and pulled the open newspaper to him instead. He folded up a corner, pressing it smooth with the precision of origami.

“A right that, I believe, is extended to all the inmates here.”

“Frederick is not your doctor.”

“Hence my use of the word ‘inmates’ rather than ‘patients.’ You misunderstand, Alana. The request is not to see the head doctor, it is to see the warden.” He hummed a laugh. “An additional title I believe Frederick would both love and hate.”

Alana stood and got a glimpse of the New Year’s Eve photo just before it disappeared under another hard pressed fold. “If you enjoy wasting your lawyers’ time, by all means do so. You know he’s not coming in here.” *And it’s just eating you up, isn’t it?*

Hannibal examined his paper creation when, with a sharp movement, he sent it flying across the cell and straight into one of the tennis-ball-sized holes cut in the glass. Alana flinched, stumbling back, only to feel hot humiliation crawl up her face a second later. The intricate little paper airplane—just that, just a stupid paper plane—lay lodged in the hole, the sharp nose pointing at her.

Hannibal’s eyes glittered with satisfaction. “I want to speak with Frederick. Please do pass on the message.”

Alana spun away, her hip barely missing the arm of the chair as she made for the door. But the desire for vengeance could be so much greater than fear, and she turned at the last moment. “I’ll do that, but as I’m sure you saw in the paper Frederick is quite busy these days. He doesn’t keep the same obsessive work hours he used to. Seems he’s finally gotten himself a personal life.”

If Hannibal’s placid smile slipped and his eyes narrowed, she was sure she didn’t know why. And if Hannibal chose to fill in the blanks of her little speech with something involving Will, well…that was his problem.

She left for her office with a much better mood and no intention of forwarding any requests.

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“You have to be right there, don’t you? That particular spot?”

Will closed the back door from the pool deck and stepped into the kitchen. Keeping his steps silent, he crossed to the living room as Frederick continued his one sided conversation with a rapt canine audience.

“Oh, no, am I in your *way,* Madam*?* You’re lucky you’re cute.”

Amazing. He still maintained Frederick was a terrible liar, but he had also done a rather thorough job hiding his good nature from everyone who met him. What would Alana think if she could see him now, fighting for space on an ottoman with two dogs he pretended to dislike while talking to them, petting them, giving them ice cream…

What do I *think of it?*

His smile faltered, only then realizing he had one. He wasn't sure if he liked what he thought of it. Just like he wasn't sure he liked the stupid grin and jittery feeling that had broken over him yesterday at the sight of a post-it note and a simple thank you.

He stopped at the corner leading to the living room, still unnoticed by Frederick or the dogs. Frederick sat perched on the edge of the sofa, leaning over a box he had arranged on the ottoman. It was a large white gift box, with red and white tissue paper poking out from under whatever Frederick was trying to fold inside. His job would have been easier if Maggie hadn't decided she needed to be on the ottoman too, rolling sideways in an attempt to show her belly and crush his work.

"If you get any hair on this, I swear that's the end of ice cream."

Maggie responded to the weak threat with a few hard thumps of her tail, smacking the leather ottoman like a drum. Mocha, who had squeezed himself backwards into the narrow space by Frederick's legs, was busy sniffing out the wonders of an empty shopping bag.

"Birthday or late Christmas?"

Frederick startled, which Will had honestly not intended, but didn't complain this time. If anything, he looked pleased.

"Both. My patient—"

"'Worst Patient'?"

"Yes, Worst Patient had her winter coat ruined by that low-life who attacker her, so it's just a replacement." He snatched up the flattened box lid and began popping out the sides. "Knowing what little I do of the foster home she's in, they'll probably stop her allowance to buy another one. It's a practical replacement."

Will approached and bent down to give Maggie a good belly rub. The wool poking out from the box, a deep plum and indigo plaid, looked several hundred dollars past practical. A guess he confirmed when he picked up the receipt Mocha had managed to spill out of the shopping bag.

"Six hundred dollars' worth of practical. From Saks Fifth Avenue." He smirked.

"*Do* you mind?" Frederick snatched the receipt away and started fussing with the tissue paper and box lid. "It makes no sense to buy something cheap if she just has to replace it again. This will last a life-time so, yes, *practical."*

He wasn't fooling anyone. Even Mocha seemed to look at him at like he was selling something. Frederick cared about this girl, the orphan living in a shit situation. And maybe it was an inappropriate stretch of doctor-patient boundaries to be flying out in the night to take her to an emergency room and buying her *practical* replacement gifts, but Will wouldn't pretend to disapprove. If this kid had so few people in her life who cared about her, why should she go without because one of those few happened to be her therapist?

And maybe Frederick understood a thing or two about needing help and being surrounded by people uninterested in giving it.

Will swallowed, his stomach twisting as if he hadn't eaten. He had.

"I got the mail on my way in." He pulled the small collection of letters from his coat pocket and handed them over. Frederick thumbed through the stack, pursing his lips at the usual abundance of junk mail, but stopped at the sight of a nicer envelope in heavy cream paper.

A split second of fear coursed through Will's veins, and he almost snatched the letter out of Frederick's hands as if it were poisoned. His sense of reason returned just as quickly, though. Hannibal was no longer in a position to be sending out letters, and poison wasn't his style anyway.

Frederick already had the letter open, his tongue moving lazily between his lips as he read.

Does he know he does that?

"Should I leave this out so you can snoop over it later?"

Will jerked himself back to the present, unaware he had been staring alternatively between the letter in Frederick hands and his lips. His tone wasn't harsh, though; more like amused.

"If it's no trouble," Will deadpanned. "I prefer snooping to prying."

Frederick rolled his eyes as he folded up the letter and set it aside, his fingers lingering over it as if to keep it down. "The national association of state mental health program directors."

"So titles aren't their strong suit."

"It's the announcement for the national conference. I'm surprised someone bothered to put me back on the mailing list." Frederick huffed—Will would call it a pout—and took his hand away from the letter. "I suppose I should go. I did last time."

"You did?" Will balked before he could stop himself. At that time last year Will had still been an inmate at the BSH, and even on days he hadn't seen Frederick he had always known he was in the building, ever watchful over his prize psychopath.

Frederick looked away to once again fuss with the tissue paper. "They don't hold it every year."

Mocha, having decided attention was far better than a shopping bag, jumped up to put his paws on Will's stomach. His old pack had been far too well trained for that sort of thing, but he found he didn't care so much. Discipline was more important when you had a dozen dogs and a large property with no fences. These two had "content house dog" written all over them.

"Ugh, you'll want to wash your hands," Frederic said, finally fitting the box lid over his practical gift. "That medicated ear-wash smells like rotting potpourri."

Will flipped Mocha's infected ear up to take a look. "You gave him his ear medicine?"

Frederick applied a few pieces of tape to the box seams. "You did it around this time yesterday. The mornings, right?"

He turned Mocha's head, getting a better view. "You cleaned his ear."

"Yes, I *cleaned* his ear first, because removing the debris of an infection *before* applying medication is something they might have touched on in medical school at some point," Frederick snarked, but there was something off about his tone. The sarcasm was too forced, too plastic, and Frederick's gaze remained fixed on the finished gift box.

That's it.

"You closet dog lover."

"Excuse me?"

"You. Love. Dogs."

Frederick had the gift box in front of him now like a shield, his forehead wrinkled in fake confusion. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Will returned to stroking Mocha's head, making his smile as smug as he could. "I'm talking about you, Dr. Frederick Chilton, and your secret love of dogs."

Frederick made a disgusted face, or tried to. It was almost believable. "Nice try, but I never had dogs growing up. Not once."

"And I bet you were jealous of every kid in the neighborhood who did."

"I'm going to be late." He hauled the box up under one arm and stumbled his way out of the ottoman-Mocha-shopping bag minefield. He was in the kitchen, pulling on his coat and scraping up keys from the bowl as he continued, "The appointment window for this damn driver's test is only fifteen minutes—"

"They're making you retake your test?" Will winced. "That would make sense, though. The change in depth perception, peripheral vision—"

"Not me, you idiot, my patient! *I* already took my retest, the first week I was able to. My depth perception is just fine."

Will showed his hands in surrender.

Frederick headed off toward the garage door, the gift box tucked under one arm and Maggie hot on his heels. "No, no, you can't go this time…"

This time?

“Do you need me to do anything while you’re gone?” Will could have bitten off his tongue, and almost did. Why, in the unholy *Hell*, did he say that?

Frederick seemed thrown too. He blinked a few times before opening the garage door and using his legs as a barrier to Maggie’s escape attempt. “Sure. Light some candles and pray for the safety of my car.”

Now it was Will’s turn to blink in surprise. “You’re letting your patient drive your car? Your teenaged unlicensed patient?”

“That is the whole point of me going. She turned sixteen yesterday and wants to get her day permit, but she doesn’t have a car for the test. And those so-called foster parents of hers won’t help.”

You’re letting a teenager use your mint condition vintage Porsche for a driver’s test. He didn’t say it, but the words still played in his head, burrowing deep like a crab wiggling itself into warm sand.

Frederick had himself wedged through the door, already an expert at the leg-dog-block maneuver, but just as he was about to close the door and head off…

“Frederick.”

“What?”

Will smiled, grinned, the biggest smug asshole smirk he could manage, and said, “Closet people lover.”

The garage door slammed in his face.

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Three hours later and Frederick was questioning his worth as a psychiatrist. This was something he had never had to deal with before. Personality disorders, psychosis, disassociation, even trauma; he had experience treating all of them, or at least studying them. There were no books or scholarly journals in his office on how to deal with angry teenaged overachievers. Or maybe there were, he would have to check later.

“You can always take the test again,” he said brightly, his voice breaking the angry silence in the car.

Ellery shifted in the passenger seat, her crossed arms crossing tighter. All the times he had thought being more like a kid would benefit her now came into question as a thoroughly pouting kid continued to glare through the windshield.

“You got a perfect score on the written exam,” he added, making a left toward the campus. “You won’t have to worry about that next time.”

“I should have gotten a perfect score on *all of it,”* Ellery snapped without yelling, which somehow made it sound more like yelling. She had been silent since stalking back into the DMV lobby with a piece of paper crushed in one hand, but there was no mistaking a pot about to boil over.

“That four-way intersection was a trick!”

There it is.

“They had one lane offset a few yards from the cross street so you had to stop and signal twice instead of just going through. For what? Seven feet?”

“No one does that in real life.”

“Yeah, but I got deducted five points. And why should I use mirrors to parallel park? You can see better if you turn around in your seat…”

Frederick pulled into the campus and started the slow circle around to the library parking lot. “But now you know what to expect on the course and you’ll nail is next time.”

“Yeah. Maybe…” She dropped her crossed arms to hug her bag instead. “I’ve never even gotten a *B* before.”

“Well, you failed, I don’t think that’s a B—”

The glare she shot him could have curdled milk.

“Okay, okay, what I mean is…” What did he mean? He barely had them stopped before Ellery was opening the passenger door and tumbling out into the cold. She was wearing an oversized hoodie sweater with some sort of graffiti art design, nothing like her usual fashion. He suspected it was a loan from her friend Martin, the size allowing her to layer on shirts beneath and make up for the lack of a coat.

The reminder put a renewed spark to his anger, but also a bit of excitement about the gift box currently resting in the trunk. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been genuinely happy about giving someone a gift.

He couldn’t remember the last time he had given anyone a gift.

“If there’s anything you’re good at, it’s study. You just need to practice a bit more, and you will be fine. Here, let’s see where you should focus.” He reached out for the paper she still held, now folded but still crushed to high heaven. Ellery gave the paper a worried look before handing it over.

“Ah.” Frederick winced at the sheer amount of red on the page. The little diagram of the driving course looking like a toddler had gone at it with a crayon. Cones knocked over, turns overcorrected, curbs crossed. After that the assessor seemed to have given up cataloguing

everything. It made no sense, she had aced the written exam, how could she have possibly… Oh.

“Did you practice much?”

“I did the online sims and I read the book.”

“Simulations?”

“Yeah, they’re on the DMV website.”

“Okay. Did you learn with an automatic transmission? If I had known that I could have made other arrangements. The Porsche isn’t the easiest car to drive—”

“No, that’s not it. I looked it up first. Standard transmission and manual steering. I even found the drivers manual for your car online, but it was only three little pages. I think they weren’t really making driver’s manuals yet back then.”

“Mmm.”

“And I watched a dozen youtube videos on how to shift gears, feathering the clutch and— What?”

The look on his face must have spoke volumes.

“You can’t study your way to learning something physical. It will get you a long way, but a lot of it is finesse and muscle memory.” God, he hated this, mostly because he should have known better. He had just assumed she had practiced already, either in her foster parents’ cars or maybe with some college friends. Asking her therapist, of all people, for help should have been a clue that she had had no other options at all. It’s not as if he would have been her first choice.

“Ellery,” he began gently, “was today the first time you’ve driven a car?”

“No! I’ve done some— I mean, my mom let me back out of the driveway sometimes…” She faded off, no doubt hearing how absurd she sounded. Letting a twelve-year-old put the family sedan in reverse was not driving a car.

She dropped her eyes and shifted away, every tell-tale sign that she was turning her frustration and disappointment inward. Frederick’s professional recall pinged, a paper about overachieving kids growing accustomed to success. So much so that when they finally encountered something they couldn’t easily do right away, they crumbled. Ellery was not so easily categorized, and he doubted a driver’s test would make her crumble. Still, he just didn’t like the miserable look on her face.

“I failed it twice.”

She looked up. “What?”

“I finally passed on my third try. When I was twenty.” He cringed for added effect, but it was only partly an act. He hadn’t thought about that in years.

“You’re making that up, Doc. You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Yes, I’m trying to make you feel better, but I could have conjured up a less humiliating way to do it if I wanted to.” He came around the back of the car to unlock the trunk. “On my first try the test lasted an impressive ten seconds. I pulled out of the parking spot without putting on my seatbelt, which is an automatic failure. The second time, I took a turn too narrow and entered the left turning lane of opposing traffic.”

“You drove the *wrong way*?”

“For a few seconds, until I panicked and the instructor was yelling, so I drove over the median to get back on the right side. That was back before they had the course behind the DMV. They did the tests out on the road.”

“Whoa.” Ellery made a show of covering her mouth, but there was no real attempt to hide the laughter.

“Pardon me, but I will not be laughed at by someone who…” He narrowed his eyes at the paper. “Who knocked over six cones doing a K-turn.”

“They had them right on the edge of the lane! What, the car isn’t supposed to go off the road *at all*?” Her outrage was more manufactured now, evidenced by the smile she wasn’t doing well to suppress.

Perfect timing. He opened the trunk and Ellery moved to retrieve her large sketch portfolio. He had placed it in the trunk for her earlier, so as to hide the unwrapped package beneath.

“Thanks anyway, Doc,” she said, sobering once more. “I bet I could get Keisha’s boyfriend to let me drive his car a few times for practice.”

“Maybe, but if his car is an automatic it won’t be much help. Not if you want to retake the test with my car.”

Her brow shot up. “You’re going to let me try again with the precious Porsche? After all the cones I ran over?”

“Don’t talk me out of it. And before you go, there’s a consolation prize.” He lifted out the white box and presented it with a flourish.

She tucked her portfolio under one arm. “No, it isn’t. You didn’t think I was going to fail.”

“True, but I did know yesterday was your birthday, so Happy Birthday.”

He held the box as she broke the two strips of tape and shimmied the lid away. The tissue paper fluttered up to reveal the Walker Slater coat he had been lucky enough to find in one outing. He had chosen a tartan scheme, since she had made more than a few comments about his “old plaid suits” being better than his lazy sweaters. The eggplant purple was so dark it

almost buried the indigo and red cross stripes, which stood out just enough to compliment. It was a pity they hadn't had the same wool in a men's cut too.

The smile she had been holding back broke into an awed 'O' as she half lifted the coat. He worried she would pull it out the wrong way and the other few gifts he had included—still practical, thank you—would tumble out of the pockets, but she laid it back into the bed of tissue and gave him a smile the likes of which he had never seen.

"Your coat was ruined, so eh..." He cleared his throat and set the box against the edge of the trunk to work the lid back on. "I have to think about my eyesight, you know. I might go blind if I have to see you in those hideous hoodies much longer."

She didn't say anything for too long, which forced him to look up at her much-too-knowing smile. She looked down at her oversized hoodie, plucking the hem out so the front design pulled smooth. "Martin threatened to sue me for a million dollars if anything happened to this."

"I have a feeling the judge would bring that down a bit."

"I would give him forty bucks and not a dime more."

Frederick snorted a laugh as he smoothed the now crinkled tape pieces back in place. He handed over the box and she finagled it under the same arm with her portfolio. With the other, she surged forward to wrap him in a tight one-armed hug.

"Thank you, Doc, it's beautiful." The words came out in a murmured rush against his lapel, a final tight squeeze around his back, and then she was off. She gave a backward wave as she hopped over the snowbank and stepped into the path other students had made across the field.

Frederick watched the awkward escape, and swore he saw her dash a hand up to her face in a wiping motion. *It's better to give than to receive.* One of those eye-roll inducing platitudes that everyone has heard at some point, usually from a parent. His mother had said it often, despite them being too broke to give or receive much of anything most of the time. And now here he was, forty-two years old and standing in a frozen parking lot, and he finally got it. He finally understood that strange, almost smug smile his mother would wear on Christmas mornings when she had managed to surprise him with one thing he wanted but had been sure he wouldn't get.

He dropped into the driver's seat and reached for his seatbelt, grinning like the most accomplished gift-giver that ever lived, thank you very much. It was turning out to be a great day.

****

"There's nothing here, Jack! We knew from the start it was unlikely—"

"Don't give me that! It has *to be there, or more likely somewhere in the public files. This guy knows something about all these killers and their kids. How else would he do that except through publically available information?"*

Frederick stopped in the open door to the garage. So much for the rest of his good day.

"How long have you been eavesdropping on this?" He whispered to Maggie as she hopped up for her required greeting.

"Maybe you should take this to Freddie Lounds, then. She's made herself rich picking through people's public garbage."

Frederick made a silent *Oooh* as Jack's reply, predictably incensed, crackled from Will's speaker phone. The commotion of the dogs, and probably the garage door, must have alerted Will to his presence. Jack's commands cut off just as Frederick rounded the corner into the kitchen. Will had the phone to her ear now, facing the windows overlooking the pool.

"Yes…I don't see any other option at this point." Will tilted his face up to the ceiling, one hand coming to rub over his eyes. "No, I'm going to try Reed first. Yeah, I—If I can avoid going to Pennsylvania, I will."

At the mention of Reed's name, an uncomfortable weight settled in Frederick's gut. He hadn't planned on Will ever finding out about his embarrassing interview attempt with Reed. Edible crayons and rice paper… What had he been thinking?

He removed his coat and draped it over the back of a bistro chair. There was no point in being coy, not when they both knew what was coming.

Will wrapped up his call with Jack and tilted his face to the rafters, drawing a breath. "So you heard that, then. I need to interview Lucas Reed."

Frederick scoffed as he opened the cupboard and pulled down the French press. It was too early for scotch, and his alcohol tolerance had been carved out of him anyway.

"You would only be wasting your time."

"I might as well waste it, then, because I'm not doing much with it now." He tossed his phone on the marble counter, making Frederick cringe for the screen, and ran both hands down his stubbled face. Frederic had assumed Will was always an early riser, but on closer look it was just as likely he hadn't gone to bed at all.

"Reed's primary changed his medication recently, which has him more lucid than he's been." He turned away to click on the kettle. "If you could call anything above catatonic *lucid.*"

"I don't care, I have to try." Will came around the counter. "Will you arrange an interview?"

He could just say no. He *could* do that, and he would be perfectly within the lines of medical ethics if he did. For once. But, as he returned to the counter and pretended to focus on spooning the perfect amount of espresso into the press, he saw Will's steadily stiffening

posture. His lips pressing into a tight, resigned line, as if he already expected Frederick to disappoint him.

"It…" He fumbled with the press top. "It wouldn't do any good. He's fixated on eyes, and yours look three different colors depending on the light in the room. You wouldn't get a word out of him other than 'come closer!'"

Will's brow shot up for a second, curious, but descended once more into a scowl. "Frederick, is there some reason you don't want me to talk to Reed?"

Fuck. "I already did."

"What?"

"I already interviewed him. Or tried to, last week. He had nothing useful."

Will rubbed a hand over his mouth once more, eyes shifting off across the room. And goddamn it, Frederick already knew what he was thinking. *Maybe nothing useful to you*. A part of him wanted to be offended, hurt at the lack of faith in his professional discernment, but another had to accept it was probably true. Will got leads and insights from things others brushed over as useless. He *saw* people. It was his entire claim to fame, for God's sake.

"I'll set up an interview. Might as well." The kettle started to whistle, giving him a grateful escape.

Will nodded, but didn't move off to his nest of files. Instead, he opened the other cupboard and pulled down two cups. He was still there, fussing with them in position when Frederick returned to fill the press. Will never fussed.

"So…my eyes change colors in different light?"

Frederick's hold on the kettle slipped, just barely missing the lip of the press. Fucking hell. *Fucking hell!*

"What? Yeah. A bit." He forced a laugh, dying a little more inside when it came out like a manic giggle. "You've never noticed your own bizarre eye color?"

Returning the kettle to its right place provided a reprieve, and getting the cream from the fridge another, but it was too short. Will was still standing there, one hand braced on the counter and not even trying to hide the fact he was following Frederick's every move. Those observant eyes—now a grayish blue in the cold winter light of the kitchen—felt like scalpels opening him up, one gentle nick at a time.

'What's in there, Frederick?'

'What are you hiding?'

Will's eyes had always looked dark blue in the hospital, a feature of the dark gray walls and shitty florescent lights.

“I guess I never had a reason to observe myself that closely,” Will said, drawing the sentence out.

The heat crawling up Frederick’s neck was starting to prickle his scalp. This needed to stop. *Now.*

“I can arrange the interview for Monday afternoon. The staff has never been able to get Reed on a standard day schedule, so anything in the morning would be pointless.” He tapped the counter and glared at the press, willing the grounds to reach the perfect steeping point before he rambled any further.

“Good. He might know something useful, even if he doesn’t realize it. Anything to give us a lead on what the victims have in common.” Will leaned back against the counter, still not leaving. Still watching. Still talking to Frederick as if he considered him part of the case.

And when the hell had that happened? When had Will gone from the investigator begrudgingly begging access to files and calling him the P.T. Barnum hack of psychiatry—Frederick was still sore over that one—to a semi indefinite houseguest who cooked vegan meals and teased him about secretly liking dogs?

Please don’t leave.

“I’ll look over what we have so far again and work out a strategy for the interview, see if I can put together a question list on Reed’s son.”

Frederick pressed down the plunger, then set to filling both cups. “Don’t bother, he didn’t know him.”

Will’s hand froze around his cup. “What?”

“Reed. He never met his son. His wife left him a few months before he was caught, and she certainly had nothing to do with him after that.” He shook his head, still raw over his failure in Reed’s interview. He had wanted so much to help, to do something that showed he was valuable, reliable. That, maybe, Will could count on him.

“Can’t say I blame her,” Frederick continued. “And considering the run of luck thus far, I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out none of them had met their fathers. Kind of hard to get personal information on people who never…never met…” No. It couldn’t be. “Will, how old was—?”

But Will was already halfway across his kitchen, leaving a splatter of coffee around his disturbed cup. He flipped open one file box, then another, pulling out papers and binders. If he was thinking the same thing Frederick was now thinking—

“That’s it. That’s *it!* Clive Morley had four children, but his youngest was born a week after his execution. She was the third victim. Barnell’s son, same thing, born after he was caught. Sean Lamott, John Corbett…”

Frederick's pulse spiked with excitement, only to flounder as quickly. "No, wait. Prylor was caught ten years ago, and his daughter was twelve."

Will was pulling on his coat and scooping up keys as he came back around the counter. "But he never met her either. His ex-girlfriend was suing him for child support. There was even a petition to force a paternity test, and his address had him living four states away at the time of the birth. I doubt he ever met his daughter, not if he was trying to dodge paternity. Or, if he did, the Horseman wouldn't have a reason to think so. No, this is it. None of the victims ever met their fathers."

The dogs were wiggling around Will's legs, anxious at the tell-tale signs of a human about to leave the house. Frederick turned to the fridge for a few slices of cheese to distract them, when Will's hands suddenly dropped onto his shoulders.

"Frederick."

He looked up, now not even a full arm's length from Will's mercurial eyes. Will's grip tightened, rhythmically, like a message. *Sweet Jesus…*

"Thank you." Will beamed. "You damn genius, I might have spoken to Reed for hours and gotten nothing."

"I doubt that." Frederick made an attempt at an eye roll, but they never worked when he was unable to stop smiling. He *had* rather broken the case, hadn't he? Maybe a little preening wasn't so bad. "You're welcome. I do actually know what I'm doing, Will."

Will shook his head, still smiling, like he thought something was funny. Then his hands were gone and he was bouncing back to the counter to retrieve his phone with the mercifully intact screen.

"If this is what he's been trying to show us, we might scoop up the golden ticket tonight when we parse down the potential victim pool."

"Golden ticket?"

Will was halfway to the garage door. "His intended target. All of this, all these victims, have been about showing us who he's really after. Now we know." He opened the door and looked back. "He's after someone with a serial killer father they've never met and a lot of long dark blonde hair."

Frederick stared at the hallway for a few seconds after he was gone, imagining the phantom warmth of hands on his shoulders as he listening the garage door rise and fall. The dogs had seen noticed his interrupted trek to the fridge, and now dancing around his legs in hope. He reached up a hand, brushed it over the warm wool of his collar.

Don't be stupid.

"Alright, yes. Cheese? Ham? I can't keep buying ham for you, I'm tempted to eat it."

As he pulled pieces off a circle of provolone and dropped them over eager mouths, he frowned. Long blonde hair? What did that have to do with anything? He would ask Will later.

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